



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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# Rural policy and delivery in Northern Ireland – an overview

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This briefing paper provides an overview of key rural policy and delivery developments between 1985 and 2024.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

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## Key Points

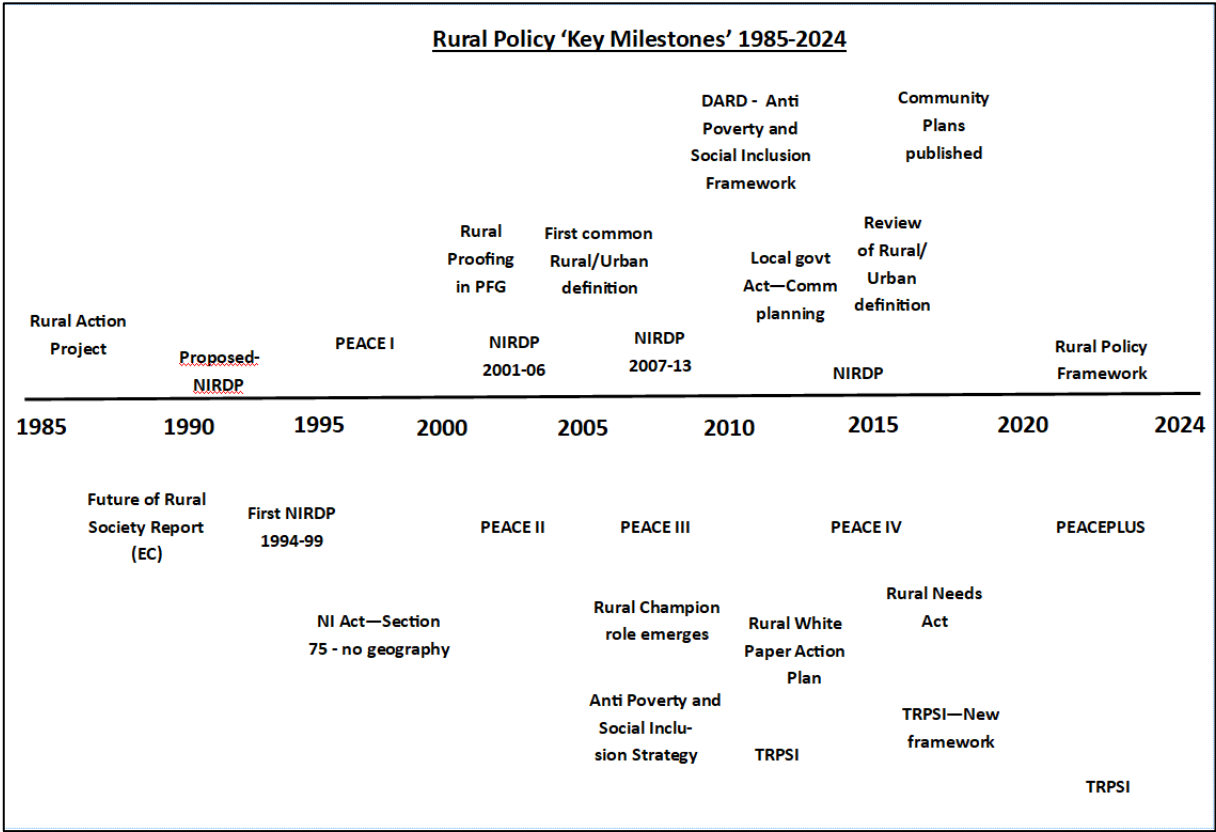
- The origins of rural policy in Northern Ireland are linked to anti-poverty work in the 1980s;
- Funding in forms such as Rural Development and PEACE monies has been a key driver since the early 1990s;
- The growth of rural community infrastructure has been integral to the identification of rural needs, delivery of projects to address these needs and the wider lobbying of government on rural issues;
- DANI/DARD/DAERA has effectively found itself responsible for rural policy and delivery since the early 1990s;
- Devolved government in Northern has contributed to the development and support of rural policy and delivery through efforts such as the definition of rural, rural proofing, rural champion role and the delivery of a Rural White Paper Action Plan;
- Legislative provisions such as the 2014 Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) and 2016 Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) have been significant for the embedding of rural consideration in policy development and service delivery;
- Post Brexit there is uncertainty around the future direction and support for rural policy development and delivery within Northern Ireland;
- The current funding uncertainty provides an opportunity for DAERA and others to actively consider where things go from here.

# Introduction

The recognition of the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by rural communities has become increasingly central to policy development within the public sector across Northern Ireland.

This paper provides an overview of the emergence of rural policy in Northern Ireland since the 1980s. The paper seeks to highlight key milestones and developments in the intervening years. Figure 1 below provides a timeline for the events covered in this paper.

Figure 1: Rural Policy ‘Key Milestones’ 1985-2024



It should be noted that this timeframe has also witnessed significant changes in the parent department where rural policy emerged and has mainly remained, evolving from the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) through to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to the current Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

The paper also provides some context for developments in Northern Ireland by contrasting these with similar developments in GB and Ireland within the rural policy sphere.

By the nature of the time period covered (1985-2024), and the breadth of the issues, the paper is more indicative than definitive and should be utilised as such.

## 1 Origins and key Rural Policy milestones in Northern Ireland 1985-2024

The following section follows a chronological order based on the first intervention under each sub-heading.

### 1.1 Anti-poverty work

Whilst establishing a definitive origin or start date for distinctive rural policy in Northern Ireland is difficult, there is a general consensus that the local anti-poverty programmes emerging from the European Economic Community's (EEC) Anti-Poverty Programmes in the 1980s were a key driver.

More specifically, the second such EEC Programme which ran between 1985 and 1989 following the adoption of Council Decision of 19 December 1984 on specific Community action to combat poverty<sup>1</sup>, supported the development of a specific rural anti-poverty action research project in Northern Ireland.

This project, which was co-sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), the Rural Association, and Strabane Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Targeted at four areas of Northern Ireland that had previously been identified as suffering the effects of rural deprivation, this project, now commonly referred to as the Rural Action Project, highlighted the impacts of hidden poverty in rural

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<sup>1</sup> [Council Decision on Specific Action to Address Poverty, 19 December 1984](#)

Northern Ireland. In particular the project drew attention to issues such as service withdrawal, unemployment, higher costs of living and an ageing population.

The evaluation report of the Rural Action Project published in 1989<sup>2</sup> highlighted key recommendations including:

- A rural community development agency be funded as matter of urgency to undertake support, training, development, information sharing and the provision of expertise to locally based rural groups;
- A policy of integrated rural planning and development be formulated and resourced through a process of community development and consultation as well as by means of the co-ordination of relevant statutory agencies;
- The creation of a specific fund for rural development.

## 1.2 Rural development as a concept and initial programme

1988 saw the publication of a seminal report, 'The future of rural society'<sup>3</sup>, by the European Commission.

This report both analysed the state of rural communities and explored potential interventions to both address challenges and unlock opportunities in rural areas and communities across Europe.

The report also highlighted the European Commission's approach to rural development based on three key considerations as follows:

- i. economic and social cohesion, in an enlarged Community of very pronounced regional diversity;
- ii. the unavoidable adjustment of farming in Europe to actual circumstances on the markets and the implications of this adjustment not only for farmers and farmworkers but also for the rural economy in general;

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<sup>2</sup> Rural Action Project (1989), Rural Development: A challenge for the 1990s, Londonderry: Rural Action Project (NI)

<sup>3</sup> [The future of rural society, European Commission report, 28 July 1988](#)

- iii. the protection of the environment and the conservation of the Community's natural assets.

Building upon the findings and proposals within the 'Future of Rural Society' report and the findings from the Rural Action Project report, in 1989 the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland appointed an Inter-Departmental Committee on Rural Development<sup>4</sup>.

This Committee was tasked with advising the Secretary of State on how best to tackle social and economic problems in Northern Ireland's most deprived rural areas which were experiencing challenges including:

- Low income;
- High unemployment;
- Depopulation and outward migration of young people;
- High dependence on agriculture;
- Low levels of manufacturing industry;
- Lack of inward investment;
- Deteriorating infrastructure and service provision.

Having considered these issues, the Inter-Departmental Committee concluded that there was a need for an integrated approach to rural development in Northern Ireland that would involve central and local government, private and voluntary sector interests with the aim of promoting and facilitating rural community development.

In response to the Committee's conclusion, the Secretary of State instigated the creation of a dedicated Rural Development Programme in Northern Ireland in 1991. This Programme was managed by the then Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) and employed a three-tiered approach as follows:

- **Animation and capacity building** – the establishment and organisation of community groups in deprived rural areas and the development of their business and project planning skills;

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<sup>4</sup> Murray, Michael and John Greer. "Rural Development in Northern Ireland: Policy Formulation in a Peripheral Region of the European Community." *Journal of Rural Studies* 8 (1992): 173-184.



- **Project implementation** – the set up and operation of viable regeneration projects;
- **Area based strategies** – identifying and responding to local needs through implementation of area plans.

Whilst the impetus and plan emerged in 1991, the actual Rural Development Programme (RDP) actually ran from 1994 to 1999 and saw £51 million being invested in rural communities across Northern Ireland, with around 60% of this funding being from the European Union (EU) and International Fund for Ireland (IFI)<sup>5</sup>.

Recorded impacts for this initial RDP in Northern Ireland included<sup>6</sup>:

- Over 1000 jobs were created, safeguarded or maintained;
- 67 new rural businesses were created;
- 178 community animation programmes were undertaken;
- 54 community projects were supported;
- 300 community organisations benefitted from development support;
- 8 area-based strategies were underway;
- 15 Local Action Groups (LAGs) were established;
- 1,449 persons successfully completed 297 training and further education courses.

### 1.2.1 Infrastructure/Organisations emerging from initial Rural Development Programme.

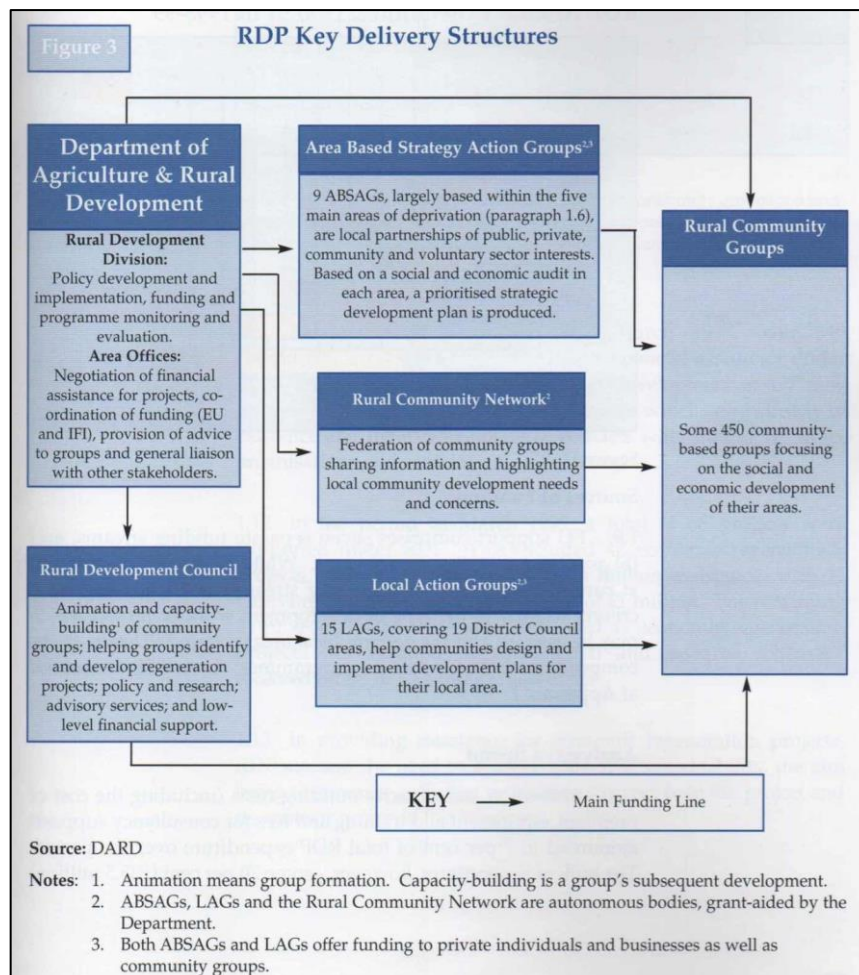
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<sup>5</sup> The Rural Development Programme, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, July 2000

<sup>6</sup> Progress Review, The Rural Development Programme in Northern Ireland 1994-1999, Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland

The initial RDP saw the creation of a range of organisations for the delivery of the support and assistance that were offered. Figure 2 below provides an overview of this infrastructure.

Figure 2: RDP Key Delivery Structures<sup>7</sup>



There have been changes to this foundational rural development infrastructure in the intervening years.

The Rural Development Council (RDC) stopped receiving DARD funding in 2009 and became an independent voluntary organisation without a role in

<sup>7</sup> The Rural Development Programme, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, July 2000, page 21

NIRDP delivery<sup>8</sup>. The organisation ceased to exist in 2019, with blame being placed on pension liabilities and political instability<sup>9</sup>. Following the closure, a new organisation, Rural Action<sup>10</sup>, emerged in 2019 and this new registered charity is actively delivering a range of support programmes and projects for rural communities.

The Rural Community Network remains active, albeit with a smaller staff team. RCN also continues to receive funding from DAERA for the work that it does, which is complemented by other funding sources.

The Local Action Groups (LAGs) continued to have an operational role in delivering funding in their areas (primarily LEADER II and LEADER+) up until the conclusion of the 2014-20 NIRDP. The lack of an NIRDP at present raises questions around the future of the LAGs.

The Area Based Strategy Action Groups (ABSAGS) role was effectively limited to the 1994-99 NIRDP.

The Rural Development Division that existed within DANI in 1990 has gone through a number of name changes in the intervening years. At the time of writing there is a distinct Rural Affairs section within the Food, Farming and Rural Affairs group in DAERA<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to these changes to original infrastructure, since 1991 there have been a number of new additions in terms of organisations and associated remits. Table 1 below provides an overview of a number of these new organisations.

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<sup>8</sup> [AQW 301/08](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Shutdown of Northern Ireland Rural Development Council blamed on pensions and political limbo, Belfast Telegraph, 15 March 2019](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Rural Action website, 5 September 2024](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Senior Staff Structure, DAERA, April 2024](#)

Table 1: New Rural Development Infrastructure/Organisations

Organisation	Remit
<p>Rural Support Networks (RSNs) – currently 6</p>	<p>Enable empowerment, capacity and future sustainability through provision of a range of support services.</p> <p>Established at various points during the 1990s there are now seven RSNs covering rural Northern Ireland as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northern Area Community Network<sup>12</sup> – covering Causeway Coast and Glens, Mid and East Antrim and Newtownabbey Council areas;</li> <li>• County Down Rural Community Network<sup>13</sup> – covering County Down;</li> <li>• TADA Rural Support Network<sup>14</sup> – covering territory in Counties Antrim, Down and Armagh;</li> <li>• Community Organisations of South Tyrone and Areas (COSTA)<sup>15</sup> – covering territory in South Tyrone and Mid Ulster;</li> <li>• Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network (CWSAN)<sup>16</sup> – covering territory in Mid Ulster and the Western Shores of Lough Neagh;</li> <li>• Omagh Forum for Rural Associations<sup>17</sup> – covering territory in the Omagh and Fermanagh areas;</li> <li>• Fermanagh Rural Community Network<sup>18</sup> – covering County Fermanagh;</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> [Northern Area Community Network](#)

<sup>13</sup> [County Down Rural Community Network](#)

<sup>14</sup> [TADA Rural Support Network](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Community Organisations of South Tyrone and Areas \(COSTA\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network \(CWSAN\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Omagh Forum for Rural Associations](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Fermanagh Rural Community Network](#)

Organisation	Remit
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid Community Network<sup>19</sup> – covers the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.</li> </ul>
Rural Support <sup>20</sup>	<p>Provides impartial guidance for farmers and farm family members in support of their farm business and personal wellbeing.</p> <p>Rural Support provides a Social Farming Support Service with associated helpline.</p>
Northern Ireland Rural Women's - Network (NIRWN) <sup>21</sup>	<p>Established in 2006 to promote and support rural women in rural Northern Ireland.</p> <p>NIRWN is a membership organisation and seeks to represent the views of rural women on a range of issues.</p>

All of the new infrastructure/organisations identified in table 1 are recipients of funding support from DAERA, which is further complemented by other funding from other sources.

### 1.2.2 Subsequent Rural Development Programmes

Since the preliminary 1994-99 Rural Development Programme there have been a total of three further Rural Development Programmes and a summary of these is provided below.

### 1.2.3 NIRD 2001-2006

The 2001-2006 NIRD had the following five elements<sup>22</sup>:

<sup>19</sup> [Rapid Community Network](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Rural Support](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Preparation for the Next Phase of the Rural Development Programme 2001-2006, Report: 2/01/R \(Continued\), Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland Assembly, 13 March 2021](#)

- **Capacity Building** – to continue to strengthen rural communities through the provision of advice and financial assistance and to provide rural people with the skills, knowledge and experience which they need to play a part in the significant economic, environmental and social changes impacting on rural areas.
- **Local Regeneration Projects and Programmes** – to provide the resources rural people need to implement their plans to improve the economic, environmental, social and cultural conditions in their areas.
- **Sectoral and Area Based Development Projects and Programmes** – to provide support for programmes and projects designed to tackle the needs or opportunities of specific sectors of the rural economy, environment or society that can be best tackled by area based or Province-wide programmes rather than a series of projects in local communities.
- **Micro-business development** – this will be a focus of the LEADER + initiative in Northern Ireland. Local partnerships will be encouraged to test out new approaches to maximise the economic potential of very small businesses in rural areas, including small farms.
- **Natural Resource Rural Tourism** – a special programme to help Northern Ireland's rural areas take advantage of the particular opportunities that are presented by tourism in the context of greater political stability.

The Programme had a total budget of £80 million and key outputs included<sup>23</sup>:

- 1,820 approved applications for rural development projects by December 2005;
- Strong financial performance through a commitment of £65 million (80% of the allocation) and expenditure of £35.5 million (44% of allocation) by December 2005;
- Strong uptake levels in some of the most western and peripheral rural areas of Northern Ireland, which are relatively less prosperous compared

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<sup>23</sup> Rural Development Programme 2001-2006, Key Achievements, DARD.

to rural areas around the Belfast Metropolitan Area and the Southern and Eastern Shores of Lough Neagh;

- Creation of 631 jobs, as ‘downstream or spin-off’ impacts of RDP 2000-2006 funding and in addition a further 130 ‘funded posts’ within the RDP delivery infrastructure and at project level;
- Training/capacity building of over 5,000 individuals in rural areas of Northern Ireland;
- Support for 149 environmental projects.

#### 1.2.4 NIRD P 2007-2013

The 2007-2013 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRD P) had three main objectives as follows:

- Axis 1 – Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry;
- Axis 2 – Improving the environment and the countryside, and
- Axis 3 – Improving the quality of life and the management of economic activity in rural areas.

The programme included two other strands or Axes, which were;

- Axis 4 – the LEADER method of delivery, and
- Axis 5 – technical assistance.

The overall value of the Programme was approximately £506 million<sup>24</sup>.

Axis 3/4 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 was designed to improve the quality of life in rural areas and encourage diversification of economic activity. Total public expenditure under this Axis was £105.8 million.

#### 1.2.5 NIRD P 2014-20

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<sup>24</sup> [Ex-post Evaluation of the 2007-13 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme \(NIRD P\), NISRA, December 2016](#)

The most recent 2014-20 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) had an overall budget of £623m, which can be broken down as follows:

- £186.5m from EU;
- £186.5m from NI Executive;
- £250m additional NI Executive money to specifically fund a Farm Business Improvement Scheme.

The NIRDP was a key mechanism for addressing the needs of rural communities within Northern Ireland, and it could be argued that all three themes and associated schemes of the programme have been designed to address social and economic needs.

A summary of the NIRDP themes and associated measures is set out below<sup>25</sup>:

### **Theme 1 – Competitiveness of Agriculture**

- **Business Investment Scheme (£199 million)** – grant support for new technologies and/or processes, upgrading or replacement of buildings/equipment to provide better nutrient management, biosecurity etc., establish renewable energy technologies;
- **On farm European Innovation Partnership Groups (£0.77 million)** – made up of farmers, researchers, levy bodies, advisors, businesses or other interested bodies including NGOs or environmental groups with the aim of advancing innovation in the agri-sector;
- **Farm Family Key Skills (£2.7 million)** – will assist farmers and farm family members to adapt to the changing needs of the industry through knowledge transfer. Assistance will fund training in areas such as animal health and welfare, biosecurity, value of ICT, and land and feed management;
- **Innovation and Technology Demonstration Scheme (£2.27 million)** – support for testing out and evaluating new ideas through on farm

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<sup>25</sup> [CAP Reform 2014 –20:EU Agreement and Implementation in the UK and in Ireland \(updated\), RAISE paper 702-14, 30 October 2014](#)



research or for adapting existing techniques and practices to new geographical/environmental contexts;

- **Farm Exchange Visits (£1 million)** – will involve farmers who share a particular interest in visiting and discussing best practice with farmers from other EU Member States;
- **Business Development Groups (£22.6 million)** – groups of farmers will be supported and advised on how to develop themselves and their businesses through learning from others;
- **Agri-food Producer Co-operation Scheme (£1.5 million)** – support for co-operation between primary producers, food processors, retailers and the food service sector to identify/promote/develop local markets, improved communications and develop efficient supply chains;
- **Food Processing Investment Scheme (up to £27.2 million)** – will cover the red meat, pig meat, poultry meat, eggs, milk and milk products, potatoes, horticulture and cereals sectors and will provide support to small scale and large processors;
- **Forestry Competitiveness Scheme (£0.48 million)** – provides investment which improves the economic value of forests in three ways – access to forest land, investments in new forestry technologies and processing and marketing of forest products;
- **Co-operation Groups (other than EIP) (£1.5 million)** – support for the setting up and operation of co-operation groups, networks or clusters between at least two actors in the agriculture, food chain or forestry sectors to achieve objectives of the RDP.

## **Theme 2 – Protecting the Rural Environment**

- **Agri-environment schemes (£162.2 million)** – will support farmers and land managers to carry out environmentally beneficial farming practices that aim to sustain and enhance biodiversity, improved water, air and soil quality, create small woodlands and help to mitigate against climate change;
- **Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances Scheme (£65 million)** – £25 million allocated to meet claims made in 2014 and paid in

2015, with £40 million allocated to meet new Areas of Natural Constraint payments in 2016 and 2017;

- **Forestry Measures (£16.6 million)** – a range of measures that will include woodland expansion, forestry plantation and woodland environment grant schemes.

### **Theme 3 – Developing Rural Economies**

- **Rural Business Investment Scheme (£27 million)** – will provide investment support for non-agricultural businesses;
- **Rural Basic Services Scheme (£15 million)** – will provide financial support to a range of measures aimed at tackling rural poverty and isolation;
- **Rural Broadband Scheme (£2 million);**
- **Rural Tourism Scheme (£10 million)** – provide support to rural tourism sector projects in line with the NI Tourism Priorities for Growth. Support to include improving facilities and infrastructure, promotion and marketing and strategic tourism product development in areas including food, walking, business and natural/cultural heritage;
- **Village Renewal Scheme (£8 million)** – provide financial support in line with Village Plans in areas including relocating activities or conversion of buildings/facilities which improve quality of life or the environmental performance of a village;
- **All Island Co-Operation Scheme (£4 million)** – provides opportunities for co-operation between government/councils/other public funded bodies on a north/south basis aimed at tackling poverty and isolation; and
- **LEADER approach (up to £14 million)** – running costs of the Local Action Groups who will support NIRDAP applicants and programme implementation/deliver.

#### **1.2.6 Latest developments**

With regards to the 2014-20 NIRD P there is currently no final assessment of either the impacts or outputs from the Programme, but this is not surprising as money could continue to be spent up until the end of 2023.

The actual future of dedicated rural development funding within Northern Ireland and the wider UK has been a topic of considerable debate since the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016.

Recent years have been marked by the previous UK Government developing a range of funding Programmes to replace EU Structural Funds that would have included Rural Development Programmes. Notable examples of such developments have included:

- The UK Community Renewal Fund<sup>26</sup> – a one-off fund that ran for one year. NI secured 6% (£12 million) of available funding<sup>27</sup>;
- The Levelling Up Fund<sup>28</sup> – £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund – in round one Northern Ireland secured £49 million (2.9%) of the total funding available;
- The Community Ownership Fund<sup>29</sup> – with three funding rounds complete 32 projects across Northern Ireland have been allocated a total of £8.34 million in funding<sup>30</sup>;
- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund<sup>31</sup> – £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment across the UK by March 2025 – allocation for Northern Ireland across three years set at has been set at £127 million.

It should be noted that none of these funds had specific or ring-fenced allocations for rural communities or projects within Northern Ireland. These funds were also subject to local criticism given the fact that administration of the monies was handled centrally within Westminster. Former DAERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, also highlighted the fact that the available funding under the

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<sup>26</sup> [New levelling up and community investments, UK Government website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>27</sup> [AQW 2194/22-27](#)

<sup>28</sup> [New levelling up and community investments, UK Government website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>29</sup> [New levelling up and community investments, UK Government website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Community Ownership Fund: successful bidders, UK Government website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>31</sup> [New levelling up and community investments, UK Government website, 16 September 2024](#)

UK shared Prosperity Fund fell short of what had been available under the various EU Structural Funds, in his response to an Assembly question in 2022<sup>32</sup>:

*...The allocation does not meet the manifesto commitment for full replacement of ESF and ERDF and falls short of the £65m per annum we would have received on average from these funds. That is before inflation is taken into account.*

*It had been previously indicated that this programme could have provided a replacement for the LEADER element of rural funding but DLUHC have confirmed that this will not be possible.*

The recent UK general election has seen a change in Government and it currently remains unclear as to what direction the new Labour government will take in relation to the development or support of funding streams for rural communities across the UK.

### 1.3 PEACE funding

In 1994 the European Commission created a task force with the objective of identifying practical ways to support peace and reconciliation activity within Northern Ireland and the six border counties within the Republic of Ireland.

The task force duly concluded that there was both an EU interest and role to play in supporting peace and reconciliation work with a special support programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties.

At the European Council meeting in Essen in December 1994 approval was secured for a multi-annual community initiative which took on the formal name of the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in 1995.

More colloquially known as the PEACE I Programme, a total of €500 million was invested in a range of projects between 1995 and 1999.

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<sup>32</sup> [AQW 2194/22-27](#)

The then Department for Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) had a role as an implementing body for a proportion of this funding.

More specifically, DANI had responsibility for a number of sub programmes as set out in table 2 below:

Table 2: PEACE I – DANI specific elements

<b>Sub Programme + measures</b>	<b>Total sub programme Budget in Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Rural specific elements</b>
Urban and Rural Regeneration (3 measures and 9 sub-measures)	€56.9 million	Measure 2b.1 Community based action – delivered by Rural Development Council and Rural Community Network  Measure 2b.2 – Rural economic Development  Measure 2b.3a – Water based tourism  Measure 21.3b – Fisheries and Agriculture  Measure 2c.1(b)- Village Renewal and tourism  Measure 2c.2 – Community led development
3 Cross Border Development (8 measures)	€37.5 million	Measure 3.3c – Co-operation between public bodies (EAGGF)  Measure 3.3d – Co-Operation between Public Bodies (FIFG)

Following on from PEACE I there were a further three PEACE programmes between 1999 and 2020 and table 3 below provides an overview of the total budget and rural specific elements of each programme.

Table 3: PEACE II,III and IV – rural specific elements

Programme	Rural specific elements
PEACE II <sup>33</sup> – 2000-2006 – Total investment €994.5 million	1.6 Training for Farmers 1.7 Diversification of agricultural activities 1.9 Investment in agricultural holdings 1.10 Basic services for the rural economy and population 1.11 Rural Reconciliation and Regeneration 2.9 Renovation and development of villages and protection and conservation of rural heritage 2.10 Encouragement for tourist and craft activities 3.4 Improving our rural communities (border region) 5.6 Agriculture and rural development co-development operation 5.7 Fishing and aquaculture
PEACE III <sup>34</sup> – 2007-2013 – Total investment of €333 million	No rural specific/exclusive measures or priorities – but were rural beneficiaries of support
PEACE IV <sup>35</sup> – 2014-2020 – Total investment of €270 million	No rural specific/exclusive measures or priorities – but were rural beneficiaries of support

### 1.3.1 Latest developments

<sup>33</sup> [PEACE II Overview, Special European Union Programmes Body website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>34</sup> [PEACE III Overview, Special European Union Programmes Body website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>35</sup> [PEACE IV Overview, Special European Union Programmes Body website, 16 September 2024](#)

The PEACEPLUS Programme 2021-27 is currently operational and is jointly funded by the EU, Irish and UK Governments with a total budget of €1.14 billion<sup>36</sup>.

There is one specific/explicit rural investment area, namely the Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion Programme (4.2)<sup>37</sup>. The aim of this programme is to create a more cohesive society through and increased provision of shared spaces and services in rural areas. Within the most recent call for applications, which has now closed (open 14 March 2024 – 30 May 2024<sup>38</sup>), there was a €50 million allocation of funding for measure 4.2.

#### 1.4 Section 75 – lack of geography as a characteristic

Following the negotiation and endorsement of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, devolved Government was established in Northern Ireland.

One key foundational building blocks for the new Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly was the Northern Ireland Act 1998<sup>39</sup>.

Section 75 of the 1998 Act placed a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to promote the need for equality across the following characteristics:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

Whilst there was a general recognition of Section 75 being a welcome development, there was concern amongst some rural stakeholders, including

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<sup>36</sup> [PEACEPLUS overview, Special European Programmes Body website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Investment Area 4.2 - Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion Programme, Special European Union Programmes Body website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>38</sup> [PEACEPLUS Programme - Funding call timetable](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#)

the Rural Community Network (RCN), at the absence of geography as one of the equality characteristics.

RCN campaigned throughout the early 2000s for the amending of Section 75 of the Act to include geography as a key characteristic. However, this campaign did not achieve a change in the law.

#### 1.4.1 Latest developments

As things stand Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland does not include geography as a key characteristic.

In the intervening years, however, the Rural White Paper Action Plan, Rural Needs Act and Rural Champion role within Government have been introduced in an effort to ensure that rural communities are treated equitably.

### 1.5 Rural proofing

Since the 2002 draft programme for government commitment<sup>40</sup>, government departments within Northern Ireland have been required to undertake rural proofing when developing policies, strategies and plans.

The former Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) produced guidance<sup>41</sup> and associated training on the process of rural proofing. The guidance produced by the department highlighted three key components to rural proofing as follows:

- Identifying the potential direct or indirect impacts a new or revised policy might have on a rural area (this may require data analysis on a rural-urban basis);
- Making a proper assessment of those impacts if they are likely to be significant; and

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<sup>40</sup> [Draft Programme for Government, Northern Ireland Executive, 24 September 2001](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Thinking Rural: The Essential Guide to Rural Proofing, DARD,](#)



- Adjusting that policy (where appropriate) to ensure that it meets the needs of rural areas.

### 1.5.1 Latest developments

The development and passing into law of the Rural Needs Act in 2016 is seen by some as having embedded and mainstreamed rural proofing as a process within policy formulation and delivery in Northern Ireland.

In 2016 DAERA commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University to undertake an investigation into developing more effective rural proofing and rural champion models.

AFBI duly produced a report on this work in 2018<sup>42</sup> that made a number of recommendations under the following themes:

- Guidance;
- Monitoring; and
- Governance

The report also included the following within its conclusions:

*The concept of rural proofing has been present within Northern Ireland from the earliest stages of self-governance. Although weaknesses in implementing the concept have been openly recognized, no formal independent review has been carried out, and no substantive reforms put in place, prior to, or as part of the institution of the RNA (Rural Needs Act).*

*This has led to numerous issues of confusion and concern amongst public authorities subject to the Act, as well as those representing rural, agricultural and environmental interests. These issues include: the ambiguity surrounding the core concepts of the Act; the tangible differences between previous iterations of rural proofing initiatives;*

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<sup>42</sup>[Rural proofing in Northern Ireland: An overview and recommendations on guidance, implementation and governance, AFBI and Centre for Rural economy Newcastle University, 2018](#)

*how to apply the Act within different contexts; standards of best practice; the usefulness of monitoring given there are no sanctions for non-compliance; the role of DAERA and how the Act relates to specifically 'rural' policy; and gaps in terms of how efforts to comply with the Act will be quality assured.*

## 1.6 Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group

In February 2005 the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) published a report from the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural definition Group.

This Inter-Departmental Group had been set up in response to the fact there was no generally accepted definition of urban and rural within government departments. In many ways this move could be seen as a mainstream confirmation of the acceptance of a need to identify and consider the distinctiveness of rural issues within Northern Ireland.

The actual report recommended that:

*...government departments and other users should consider defining 'urban' and 'rural' areas in ways which are appropriate for different programmes and projects... It follows that different definitions of urban and rural are appropriate on different occasions.*

Although recommending this flexibility, the report also recognised the value of having a generally recognised and agreed definition of urban and rural. Whilst the group considered different means by which this definition could be achieved, they ultimately settled on the adoption of a settlement population size based approach as presented in figure 3 below.

Figure 3 Statistical classification of settlements<sup>43</sup>

Label	Name	Settlement population size (2001 Census)
Band A:	Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA)	c580,000
Band B:	Derry Urban Area (DUA)	c90,000
Band C:	Large town	18,000 or more and under 75,000 (outside BMUA and DUA)
Band D:	Medium town	10,000 or more and under 18,000 (outside BMUA and DUA)
Band E:	Small town	4,500 or more and under 10,000 (outside BMUA and DUA)
Band F:	Intermediate settlement	2,250 or more and under 4,500 (outside BMUA and DUA)
Band G:	Village	1,000 or more and under 2,250 (outside BMUA and DUA)
Band H:	Small village, hamlet and open countryside	Settlements of less than 1,000 people and open countryside (outside BMUA and DUA)

Under this approach bands A-E could be defined as urban, and Bands F-H as rural, effectively meaning that rural settlements had populations of less than 4,500 people.

NISRA supported and published a review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements under the instruction of the civil service in 2015<sup>44</sup>. This work was undertaken by a representative cross-Departmental sub-group and was informed by three key data sets:

- The 2011 Census of population;
- November 2014 Settlement Development Limits provided by the Planning section of the (then) Department of the Environment; and

<sup>43</sup> [Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group, Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, NISRA, 2005, page 3](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, NISRA, March 2015](#)

- The drive times to town centres within settlements of 10,000 people or more, provided by the Analytical Service Unit of the (then) Department of Social Development.

The sub group's final recommendations were as follows:

- That the default rural/urban boundary in terms of settlement population size should remain the same, i.e. Bands A – E are urban and Bands F – H are rural.
- The urban-rural population boundary should move to a population of 5,000 because of the slight revisions to the population boundary between small town and intermediate settlement.
- Information on both inside and outside a 20-minute and 30-minute drive-time from a service centre location (a town centre of a settlement with a population of at least 10,000) is made available, and users can utilise the information appropriately.

These recommendations were adopted and the 5,000 population size has become the default rural/urban split utilised across government.

### 1.6.1 Latest developments

There have been no further efforts to amend or update the 2015 rural /urban definition within Northern Ireland.

Many key statistics utilised to inform policy development across Government can now be disaggregated on a rural/urban basis.

DAERA has also developed a dedicated rural statistics section<sup>45</sup> on their website which provides a rural/urban breakdown in areas such as connectivity, economic activity and health, education and wellbeing.

DAERA also publishes an annual Key Rural Issues report which seeks to:

*...provide a robust evidence base to inform the future direction of rural policy in NI, to underpin the Rural Needs Act (2016), and to*

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<sup>45</sup> [Rural statistics page, DAERA website, 16 September 2024](#)

*support the equitable treatment of rural communities in policies and programmes across Government*

The latest such report, covering data for 2023, and preceding versions can be accessed [here](#)

## 1.7 Rural Champion

The role of Rural Champion in Northern Ireland was first set out in the NI Executive's 2008-11 Programme for Government(PFG)<sup>46</sup>.

PSA 17(2) within the 2008-11 PFG has the specific objective of adopting the role of Rural Champion and responsibility for the achievement of this objective lay initially with DARD, but there was a recognition that, pending agreement, delivery would involve the other Northern Ireland Civil Service departments.

In terms of specific actions PSA17(2) identified the following for completion by the end of 2008:

- Define the role of Rural Champion and enhance the Rural Proofing process;
- Develop proposals for a Rural White Paper.

DARD duly developed proposals for what the Rural Champion role would be, informed by four key aims as follows:

- Develop a joined-up approach to rural policy making across government;
- Ensure robust application of rural proofing and the championing of rural issues;
- Ensure equitable access to services and programmes by rural communities; and
- Develop an evidence base that clearly identifies the socio-economic and environmental needs of rural communities.

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<sup>46</sup> [Programme for Government 2008-11, Northern Ireland Executive](#)

Informed by these aims and stakeholder engagement DARD developed six so called 'roles' that the Rural Champion function would fulfil as follows<sup>47</sup>:

- **Advocate:** to represent the views of the rural community across Government;
- **Watchdog/ Mainstreamer:** to ensure rural issues are addressed across government;
- **Listener:** to build information based partnerships with rural stakeholders that enable the voices of rural dwellers to be heard;
- **Advisor:** to establish a rural evidence base that will aid the decision making of government policy makers;
- **Initiator:** to initiate the development of policies and actions to address specific rural needs; and
- **Exemplar:** to lead by way of example in improving the rural economy, environment and rural way of life.

A public consultation exercise running between August – November 2008 saw broad endorsement of these roles and the suggested addition of a **Facilitator** role that:

*could operate as a co-ordination function ensuring that for example, learning and outcomes from rural proofing are properly communicated across government and stakeholders, or perhaps joining up rural issues that cut across several Departments.*

DARD subsequently published an Action Plan for the delivery of the Rural Champion Concept and Enhanced Rural Proofing Process that covered the period up until 2012<sup>48</sup>.

### 1.7.1 Latest developments

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<sup>47</sup> [Rural Champion, background and consultation summary, DARD](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Rural Champion Action Plan, DARD](#)

Public pronouncements on the Rural Champion concept and role are not as explicit or common as they were in the mid-2010s, perhaps suggesting that the issue has been mainstreamed.

Interestingly, in the foreword to the Rural Policy Framework<sup>49</sup> published in March 2022, then DAERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, made reference to DAERA's role as Rural Champion.

## 1.8 Rural White Paper

The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2007-2011 contained a commitment to obtain approval from the Executive for the development of a Rural White Paper, which would include contributions from a range of government departments in addition to the work of the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

The inclusion of this commitment in the Programme for Government was welcomed by many rural stakeholders who had been actively lobbying for a local Rural White Paper as a means to embed recognition of the uniqueness of rural within the policy development environment.

An agreed and finalised Rural White Paper Action Plan<sup>50</sup> was published in 2012, following consultation and developmental work with stakeholders and government departments. It contained 94 time-bound and departmental specific commitments to address rural issues under five broad thematic policy priorities as follows:

- Urban/Rural Linkages;
- Access to Services;
- Rural Communities;
- Rural Economies;
- The Countryside.

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<sup>49</sup> [Rural Policy Framework for NI, DAERA, March 2022](#)

<sup>50</sup> [Rural White Paper Action Plan, DARD](#)

The Action Plan was designed to have a ten-year lifespan but there was also a commitment to a full review of the plan after five years i.e. 2017.

In terms of monitoring of delivery against the commitments, a newly created Inter-Departmental Committee on Rural Policy was created to initially report to DARD on a quarterly basis. DARD/DAERA also committed to compile and publish an annual progress report and to date a total of four such reports have been completed<sup>51</sup>.

### 1.8.1 Latest developments

The last progress report for the Rural White Paper Action Plan was published in June 2016.

The original plan to review the Action Plan in 2017 failed to happen due to the fall of the NI Executive and Assembly in January 2017.

In the intervening period between 2017 and 2024 there appear to have been no moves to complete this review process.

## 1.9 Community Planning

The concept of community planning was introduced to the NI policy landscape in 2014 under the [Local Government \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2014](#). The Act places a statutory duty on councils to produce and implement community planning through the production of Community Plans for their area.

The Community Plan is a 15-year plan which provides the strategic framework within which councils, along with departments, statutory partners and other relevant organisations must work together to develop and implement a shared vision that complements the outcomes and plans of the draft Programme for Government (PfG). This is a long-term vision for promoting the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area through the delivery of better services.

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<sup>51</sup> [Rural White Paper action plan and progress reports, DAERA website, 21 September 2024](#)



The Community Plan is a council's key strategic document that will shape other strategies and policies such as the council's corporate plan, local development plans, economic strategies etc.<sup>52</sup>. It ensures that a collective vision is developed by all stakeholders, and that council plans will work to achieving this vision.

Community plans are to be in place for 15 years, with most having been in place from 2017, running to post 2030.

For more information refer to [Circular LG 28/15 – Statutory guidance for the operation of community planning](#) produced by the Department.

### 1.9.1 Community Planning Partners

Community planning aims to improve the connection between regional, local and neighbourhood level through partnership working. The Local Government Act 2014 places a duty on statutory partners to fully engage with councils in the delivery of community planning. These statutory partners are listed under the [Local Government \(Community Planning Partners\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#) (2016 Order):

- The Education and Library Boards (now unified under a single Education Authority);
- The Health and Social Care Trusts;
- Public Health Agency;
- Health and Social Care Board;
- Police Service of Northern Ireland;
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service;
- Invest Northern Ireland;
- Northern Ireland Tourist Board;
- Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SportNI);
- Libraries NI;

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<sup>52</sup> For example, see how Belfast's Community Plan sits with its other plans and strategies [Our strategies and plans | Belfast City Council](#).

- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Community Planning Partnerships provide the bridge in creating that link and have been established in each district. They mostly comprise the council, statutory bodies (as provided for in the 2016 Order), agencies and the wider community, including the community and voluntary sector. For example, [Belfast's Community Planning Partnership](#) is made up of the strategic Community Planning Partnership (which includes the statutory partners), four Thematic Boards, delivery-focused Working Groups (or Tasking Groups), and a [Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Advisory Panel](#).

Therefore, councils can shape their Partnerships to the needs and make up of their area. Most councils appear to list their statutory partners and additional support partners, for example Lisburn and Castlereagh,<sup>53</sup> Derry and Strabane<sup>54</sup> [Mid and East Antrim](#). However, there appears to be no sign of specific rural stakeholder-based organisations having been added to either their statutory or additional support partners list. Ards and North Down have additional Strategic Community Planning Partners listed in addition to the statutory partners.<sup>55</sup> In fact the updated community plan refers to collaboration with existing partnerships such as the Rural Partnership<sup>56</sup>. Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) inform how membership of its Partnership is always under review allowing for additional support partners to be added.<sup>57</sup> Under specific actions in its most recent [Progress Report](#) e.g. employability and skills, ABC list the Antrim, Down and Armagh Rural Support Network (TADA) as a partner.

That being said, partners involved throughout the delivery of community plans and membership of Partnerships across all councils are not very clear. Therefore, it is difficult to get a full understanding as to whether all councils

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<sup>53</sup> [Lisburn and Castlereagh Community Plan 2017-32, page 6](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Our Community Plan, Inclusive Strategic Growth Plan 2017-32, Derry City and Strabane District, page 3](#) (p.3)

<sup>55</sup> [The Big Plan for Ards and North Down, Part II](#)

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*

<sup>57</sup> [Connected, A Community Plan for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough, 2017-32](#)

have used this ability to make specific additions to their partnerships in relation to wider rural stakeholders etc.

1.9.2 Review

Sections 69 and 70 of the Local Government Act 2014 set out the statutory requirements for the review of community plans which must be completed before the fourth anniversary of the date on which the Plan was published. However, it appears that councils are at different stages with their reviews and updated plans. For example, [Belfast City Council](#) has reviewed and updated their plan in 2024<sup>58</sup>, and Ards and North Down published an updated [Part II Plan in 2022](#). Other councils do not appear to have got as far as an update, but have conducted a review e.g. Antrim and Newtownabbey [review from 2017 to 2023](#).

1.9.3 Community Plans and Rural Needs

The following section (table 4) provides an overview of the consideration of rural aspects and Rural Needs Act requirements in councils’ community plans. This is in no way conclusive, but provides examples across all councils so as to give a general understanding of how rural needs is included at the community planning level.

Table 4: Overview of the consideration of rural aspects and Rural Needs Act requirements in councils’ community plans

Council	Community Plan and date	Rural aspects in plan	Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	<a href="#">Love Living Here Plan</a> 2017-2030	Not much detail provided in plan. Mentions problem of availability of public transport in rural areas.	<a href="#">Rural Proofing screening</a> : It concluded that an in depth rural proofing

<sup>58</sup> [Belfast Agenda 2024 - 2028 | Your say Belfast \(belfastcity.gov.uk\)](#)

<b>Council</b>	<b>Community Plan and date</b>	<b>Rural aspects in plan</b>	<b>Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)</b>
	<a href="#">Review conducted 2017- 2023</a> <sup>59</sup>	Not much mention of rural aspects bar an action for rural road safety.	process was not required as any potential detrimental impact in rural areas is mitigated by the area-based approach to design and delivery of local action plans.
Ards and North Down	<a href="#">Big Plan</a> 2017-2022  <a href="#">Big Plan II</a> 2022-2032	Original <a href="#">Big Plan</a> mentions increasing availability of jobs and quality of businesses in rural areas.  Use of Rural Investment Scheme to support this. <sup>60</sup>  No mention of rural aspects in updated plan.	Original Big Plan mentions rural proofing report in 2016 <sup>61</sup> . However, there are no further details of it in the plan.  The updated Big Plan II does not appear to refer to rural screening/proofing.
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	<a href="#">Connected Community Plan</a> 2017-2030	Not a lot of detail provided in plan. The plan mentions a few areas needed addressed:  Delivery of sustainable business start-ups and growth in rural areas.	The plan does not mention rural screening/proofing. Details full equality impact assessment and sustainability screening of plan, with no mention of rural.

<sup>59</sup>For more detail see [Community Planning - Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council \(antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk\)](http://antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk)

<sup>60</sup> [Performance Update Report 1 December 2018 \(1\).pdf](#)

<sup>61</sup> Ards and North Down The Big Plan [https://engage.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/communityplanning/delivering-thebigplan/supporting\\_documents/The%20Big%20Plan%20for%20Ards%20and%20North%20Down%2020172032%20reprint%20version.pdf](https://engage.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/communityplanning/delivering-thebigplan/supporting_documents/The%20Big%20Plan%20for%20Ards%20and%20North%20Down%2020172032%20reprint%20version.pdf) (p.9)

Council	Community Plan and date	Rural aspects in plan	Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)
		<p>Addressing need for more quality green spaces in rural areas for health and vitality.</p> <p>Aim to provide good services, transport links, digital access in rural areas.</p> <p>Under its latest <a href="#">Progress Report</a> lists the Antrim, down and Armagh Rural Support Network (TADA) as partner under employability and skills action.</p>	
Belfast	<a href="#">The Belfast Agenda</a> Updated 2024-2028	There is no mention of rural aspects in the Plan, or associated <a href="#">Action Plans</a>	<a href="#">Rural Needs Impact Assessment</a> of updated plan. Found: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most impacts likely to be positive</li> <li>• Not likely to impact people in rural areas different to those in urban</li> <li>• Likely to impact following rural policy areas: businesses, housing, jobs/employment, education, transport, poverty, deprivation, rural development.</li> </ul>
Causeway Coast and Glens	A Better Future Together 2017-2030	Not a lot of detail provided in plan. It makes general reference to issues of rural access to health,	Rural Proofing Report conducted and concluded:

Council	Community Plan and date	Rural aspects in plan	Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)
		telecommunications and social isolation amongst older rural population as issues.	<p>While it is not a legal requirement that Local Government rural proofs its policies, it is good practice.</p> <p>An in-depth rural proofing process is not required as any potential detrimental impact in rural areas is mitigated by the area-based approach to design and delivery of local actions. The Community Plan demonstrates no difference in its application between urban and rural dwellers. The impact of subsidiary action plans, strategies, policies and programmes will be considered separately at an appropriate level<sup>62</sup></p> <p>Due regard to rural needs in development of Community Plan Delivery Plan<sup>63</sup></p>

<sup>62</sup> [Community Plan Report Design WR.pdf \(causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk\)](#) (p.34)

<sup>63</sup> DAERA [Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 2022-2023 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) (p.87)

<b>Council</b>	<b>Community Plan and date</b>	<b>Rural aspects in plan</b>	<b>Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)</b>
Derry and Strabane	Making it Happen 2017-2032 (updated) 2022	<p>Improving rural digital connectivity – with a rural broadband scheme.</p> <p>Maximise rural job creation and investment opportunities through funding e.g. RDP funding for capital projects e.g. Villages enhancement &amp; Rural Development Programme by 2025<sup>64</sup></p> <p>Addressing social deprivation and isolation in rural areas.</p> <p>Provide quality rural social and private housing.</p> <p>Enhanced rural transport services.</p> <p>Shared spaces and services through rural community clusters.</p> <p>Lists rural development as a cross-cutting theme of the Community Plan and rural local growth plans of Sperrin, Derg and Faughan.<sup>65</sup></p>	<p>Rural screening conducted<sup>66</sup>. Community Plan itself informs that the plan was screened in accordance with the Rural Needs legislation and the Council has established a rural issues group to ensure that wellbeing is realised and integrated within our rural communities<sup>67</sup>.</p> <p>Rural issues group hosts regular meetings and rural symposiums to consider issues such as digital connectivity, capacity building, poverty, housing, safety and rural support.<sup>68</sup></p>

<sup>64</sup> [Community Plan Report Design WR.pdf \(causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk\)](#) (p.54)

<sup>65</sup> Ibid (p.28)

<sup>66</sup> DAERA Rural Needs Monitoring Report 2017/18 [Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report - June 2017 - March 2018 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) p.43

<sup>67</sup> [Community Plan Report Design WR.pdf \(causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk\)](#) (p.28)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid (p.63)

<b>Council</b>	<b>Community Plan and date</b>	<b>Rural aspects in plan</b>	<b>Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)</b>
		Mentions alignment with Rural Policy Framework and Rural Needs Act.	
Fermanagh and Omagh	2030 Community Plan 2017-2030	<p>The plan mentions that the council is primarily rural and a key challenge will be to ensure the continued vitality and sustainability of the rural communities.</p> <p>However, the plan itself provides no further detail.</p> <p>The associated Action Plan:</p> <p>Highlights issues around an aging rural population with loneliness and isolation. Need for improved uptake of internet amongst older rural population and access to public transport etc.</p> <p>One action is to establish a Working Group to identify key local transport concerns around rural connectivity and access needs.</p> <p>Latest Progress Report:</p>	<p>Council Guidance states that the Council is responsible for ensuring Rural Needs Impact Assessment is fulfilled.</p> <p>Conducted Rural Needs Impact Assessment of Draft Community Plan Action Plan<sup>70</sup>.</p>

<sup>70</sup> [Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report - June 2017 - March 2018 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) (p.48)



<b>Council</b>	<b>Community Plan and date</b>	<b>Rural aspects in plan</b>	<b>Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)</b>
		Increase frequency, accessibility and affordability of transport provision, specifically for rural residents. Fermanagh Rural Community Transport and Easilink Community Transport, Omagh as the action lead. <sup>69</sup>	
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Lisburn and Castlereagh Community Plan 2017-2032	Highlights some concerns around: rural deprivation, transport.  Uncertainty over the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union on agricultural subsidies, for business, on structural funds and future community and economic investment such as the Rural Development Programme	Lack of detail in Community Plan or associated action plan on any rural needs impact assessment.  DAERA's Rural Needs Annual Reporting suggests mainstreaming of rural needs and community planning through the development of other plan and policies <sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> [FOCPP-Collaborative-Impact-Report-Final-amended-version-240215-with-hyperlinks.pdf \(fermanaghmagh.com\)](#) (p.16)

<sup>71</sup> DAERA Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 2019/20 [20.21.116 Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report Final V2.PDF \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) (p.101)

<b>Council</b>	<b>Community Plan and date</b>	<b>Rural aspects in plan</b>	<b>Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)</b>
Mid and East Antrim	Putting People First 2017-2021  Update 2022-2032	Not much detail in the plan on rural aspects. Makes general reference to Urban and rural regeneration to help revitalise our main town centres and rural economies <sup>72</sup> . Challenges around rural access to services.	Lack of detail in Community Plan or associated action plan on any rural needs impact assessment.  Rural Needs Annual Reporting suggests mainstreaming of rural needs and community planning through the development of other plan and policies <sup>73</sup>
Mid Ulster	Our Community Plan – 10 Year plan for Mid Ulster 2017-2027	Identifies areas of rural deprivation, poor broadband coverage, roads etc.  Actions:  Provide sustainable support for rural business development.  Link with LDP to ensure rural business growth, industrial and employment sites.	Rural needs due regard given:  The development of the Mid Ulster Community Plan has taken account of the needs of people in rural areas within the district particularly in terms of how services could and should be delivered ensuring that those

<sup>72</sup> Taken from [Summary document](#) of Plan as unable to access full plan from website

<sup>73</sup> [Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report - June 2017 - March 2018 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) (p.54)

Council	Community Plan and date	Rural aspects in plan	Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)
		Pilot an 'Integrated Transport Scheme for rural areas, people and businesses <sup>74</sup> .	<p>most vulnerable have access to services at a local level and where high quality services can be maintained.<sup>75</sup></p> <p>Community Plan states:</p> <p>The Plan takes account of equality, good relations, sustainable development, social inclusion and rural proofing and it has been screened to ensure that it does not impact negatively upon these core principles.</p>
Newry Mourne and Down	Living Well Together 201-2030	<p>Not much detail in Plan bar identification of the need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• for better rural infrastructure to support rural diversification</li> </ul>	<p>Lack of detail in Community Plan or associated action plan on any rural needs impact assessment.</p> <p>Rural Needs Annual Reporting suggests mainstreaming of rural needs and community planning</p>

<sup>74</sup> Mid Ulster Community Plan [COMMUNITYPLAN-final.indd \(midulstercouncil.org\)](#)

<sup>75</sup> DAERA Rural Needs Monitoring Report 2018-2019 [Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 1 April 2018 - 31 march 2019 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) p.101

Council	Community Plan and date	Rural aspects in plan	Rural Needs Act (including due regard, rural screening/proofing, rural needs impact assessment)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• for better access and support services for rural vulnerable people</li> <li>• for better internet coverage and more housing</li> </ul>	through the development of other plan and policies <sup>76</sup>

#### 1.9.4 Observations

- There do not appear to be any rural based organisations or bodies listed as statutory partners under the 2016 Order. However, it appears councils can add to their community planning partnerships beyond those listed in the 2016 Order. While some councils have added rural based organisations to their additional partners, it is unclear whether all have done this.
- There are differing levels of detail and considerations given to rural aspects across councils' community plans. Some do not refer to rural aspects at all; others make brief reference, with some providing more detail in associated action plans. While some councils provide more detail on rural issues to be addressed and highlight actions. Some of the common issues identified include: improved access to public transport, digital connectivity, housing, addressing isolation.
- The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 places a duty on councils, to have 'due regard' to rural needs when developing, plans and policies

<sup>76</sup> DAERA Rural Needs Monitoring Report 2019/20 [20.21.116 Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report Final V2.PDF \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](#) p.121/122

etc. However, some councils have stated that there is no legal requirement for Local Government to rural proof its policies. That being said, it appears that some councils perform it as best practice. In summary:

- With some councils it is not clear whether rural impact assessments, screening etc. have been conducted on their community plans due to lack of reference in plans, or associated published documents e.g. ABC, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim, and Newry Mourne and Down.
  - However, DAERA's Rural Needs Annual Reporting may suggest mainstreaming of rural needs and community planning through the development of other plans and policies e.g. Lisburn and Castlereagh, Mid and East Antrim, and Newry Mourne and Down.
  - Some have performed screening e.g. Ards and North Down, with some concluding that rural impact assessment is not needed of their Community Plan and that issues would be addressed in action plans e.g. Antrim Newtownabbey, Causeway Coast and Glens.
  - Derry and Strabane screened their community plan and established a rural issues group to ensure that wellbeing integrated within its rural communities.
  - Belfast and Mid Ulster performed a Rural impact Assessment of their community plans and Fermanagh and Omagh on its Community Plan Action Plan.
- This raises the question, should there be a requirement to conduct a rural impact assessment of Community Plans and associated action plans?
  - It may be useful to find out, if under the review process of community planning, should there be a requirement introduced to conduct rural proofing/ rural impact assessment/screening of all community plans?

## 1.10 Rural Needs Act

The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland)<sup>77</sup> received Royal Assent on 9 May 2016 and came into operation for Government Departments and District Councils on the 1 June 2017. The Act and its provisions came into force for the following public bodies on 1 June 2018:

- The Police Service of Northern Ireland;
- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- The Education Authority;
- The Health and Social Care Trusts;
- Invest Northern Ireland;
- The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service;
- The Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- Libraries NI;
- Tourism NI;
- The Public Health Agency;
- The Regional Health and Social Care Board; and
- Sport NI.

In effect the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 sought to build on the existing rural proofing commitments, whilst also extending these requirements beyond government departments. The Act effectively set out three key requirements for public authorities as follows:

- The consideration of rural needs;
- Monitoring and reporting on how the public authority has complied with this requirement; and
- Co-operation and sharing of information with other public authorities.

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<sup>77</sup> [Rural Needs Act \(Northern Ireland\)](#)

Focussing on the first of these requirements, namely the consideration of rural needs, the guidance published by DAERA to accompany the Act<sup>78</sup> sets out in greater detail how these are defined as follows:

*The Act defines ‘rural needs’ as “the social and economic needs of rural areas”. It is important to be clear what this means and to be able to distinguish between a need and something that is desirable. In general terms, a need can be considered to be something that is essential to achieve a standard of living comparable with that of the population in general. For example, it can relate to the ability to access key public services such as health and education, the ability to access suitable employment opportunities, and the ability to enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle.*

In terms of the specific requirements of the Act relating to the consideration of rural needs, Section 1 of the Act contains the requirement for public authorities to have ‘due regard’ to rural needs when:

- Developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans; and
- Designing and delivering public services.

### 1.10.1 The ‘Brown Principles’ in relation to ‘due regard’

Whilst the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 does not include a definition of what is meant by ‘due regard’, the so called ‘Brown Principles’ developed on the basis of case law within Great Britain (GB) (namely R. (Brown) v. Secretary of State for Work and Pensions [2008] EWHC 3158) are generally cited by bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and utilised by GB courts in cases since 2008, as providing a basis of assessing whether the obligation to have ‘due regard’ has been met. The six Brown Principles could be summarised as follows<sup>79</sup>:

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<sup>78</sup> [A Guide to the Rural Needs Act \(NI\) 2016 for Public Authorities, DAERA](#)

<sup>79</sup> [Due Regard \(Brown Principles\), Equality Impact Assessment in Wales Practice HUB website, 29 March 2018](#)

- **Knowledge** – decision makers should be aware of the implications of the duty when making decisions about their policies and practices;
- **Timeliness** – due regard must be paid before and at the time that a particular decision is being considered, not later. Attempts to justify a decision as being consistent with the exercise of the duty when it was not, in fact, considered before the decision, are not sufficient to discharge the duty;
- **Analysis must be rigorous** – must be exercised in substance, with rigour and with an open mind in such a way that it influences the final decision. Not a box ticking exercise;
- **Non-delegable** – will always remain the responsibility of the body subject to the duty;
- **Continuing duty** – ongoing and must be revisited;
- **Record keeping** – encourages transparency and provides evidence of duty being fulfilled.

### 1.10.2 Latest developments

It should be noted that since it came into force in 2016 there appear to have been no instances where the provisions provided under the Rural Needs Act have been utilised through Judicial Review.

The annually published Rural Needs Monitoring Report provides an insight into the work generated by the Act in the form of rural needs impact assessments conducted by public bodies in the course of their work. The most recent report, covering the period between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, was published in March 2024<sup>80</sup>, and revealed that 502 Rural Needs Impact Assessments were conducted over this time period.

To date there has been no overall review of the Act and its impact.

A review into the implementation of the Rural Needs Act was instigated by DAERA in 2019 through the establishment of a working group. The working

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<sup>80</sup> [Rural Needs, Annual Monitoring Report 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023, DAERA](#)



group published their report in 2020<sup>81</sup> and this included 25 recommendations on themes including:

- a lack of awareness among decision makers of the need to comply with the due regard duty and of what was required to be done to fulfil the due regard duty;
- amending and updating data on the Rural Needs pages on the DAERA website;
- the merit there would be in undertaking research to identify examples of where the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 or rural proofing had made a positive difference to rural communities;
- monitoring and reporting is only as effective as the governance systems in place within an organisation and that without an effective monitoring system there is a risk that not all RNIA Templates may be included in public authority's annual monitoring return.

The chair of the working group acknowledged the following in terms of the review and its limitations:

*...the focus of the review was on the implementation of the legislation by public authorities and the support provided by DAERA rather than on the policy outcomes and the impacts on public services resulting from the legislation.*

An Assembly question submitted and answered in 2021<sup>82</sup> suggested that whilst DAERA had made progress on implementing a number of the working group recommendations, there was more work to do. It remains unclear as to the status of recommendation implementation at the time of writing.

The Rural Needs Act does require a three yearly review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule to the Act, and the latest public consultation

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<sup>81</sup> [Report on the Review of the Implementation of The Rural Needs Act \(NI\) 2016, Rural Needs Working Group, 2020](#)

<sup>82</sup> [AQW 14421/17-22](#)

exercise to fulfil this purpose launched on 22 July 2024, with a closing date of 13 September<sup>83</sup>.

### 1.11 Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation/Inclusion (TRPSI)

As far back as 2007, the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy<sup>84</sup> recognised the particular challenges that rural communities faced. This Strategy included specific commitments to eliminate poverty in rural areas.

As part of their response to the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, and as a Programme for Government commitment<sup>85</sup>, the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) developed and delivered an Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework that ran between 2008 and 2011 and had an overall budget of £10 million.

DARD also developed a follow up Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Framework that ran between 2011 and 2015. Details on this Framework are provided in a previous RalSe paper (NIAR 460-14) that can be accessed [here](#).

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework Initiative was the (now DAERA's) third iteration of work designed to address rural poverty and social isolation within rural areas and began in 2016. £4 million of funding was allocated to the delivery of the framework between 2016 and 2017. Support was directed to the following issues and associated measures:

**Access Poverty – Promote fair and equitable access to key services for all rural dwellers:**

- Assisted Rural Travel Scheme;
- Maximising Access in Rural Areas (MARA);
- Farm Family Health Checks;
- Rural Broadband;

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<sup>83</sup> [DAERA seeks views on Review of the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act \(NI\) 2016, Press release, DAERA, 22 July 2024](#)

<sup>84</sup> [Lifetime Opportunities, Government's Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, OFMDFM](#)

<sup>85</sup> [Programme for Government 2008-11, Northern Ireland Executive, page 11](#)

- Community Facilities.

**Financial Poverty – Maximise household incomes:**

- SUSE+ (Step Up to Sustainable Employment);
- RYE Connect (Rural Youth Entrepreneurship);
- Maximising Access in Rural Areas (MARA);
- Affordable Warmth Scheme.

**Social Isolation – Promote tolerance, health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers:**

- Rural Support charity;
- Social Farming Support Service;
- Rural Community Development;
- Rural Micro Capital Grant Programme;
- Community Halls;
- Community Facilities;
- Rathlin Harbour; and
- Forkhill.

A further TRPSI programme covering the 2021 to 2022 period and worth £8.37 million (£2.67 million resource and £5.7 million capital) supported a total of 19 initiatives as identified in Assembly question AQW 27207/17-22<sup>86</sup>.

For 2022-23 the TRPSI funding allocation was identified as amounting to £7.47 million (£2.74 million resource and £4.73 million capital). A summary of the supports schemes provided is available [here](#).

### 1.11.1 Latest developments

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<sup>86</sup> [AQW 27207/17-22](#)

DAERA Minister Andrew Muir MLA identified a 2023-24 budget allocation for TRPSI of £1.57 million funding with a further £0.921 million, baselined in the lead delivery Department's budgets<sup>87</sup>.

In the same Assembly question answer Minister Muir revealed his intention:

*...to consider proposals for the delivery of initiatives under the TRPSI programme for 2024/25 in conjunction with wider budget discussions to ensure funding is targeted towards key departmental priorities.*

It should also be noted that DAERA instigated a review of TRPSI in May 2024 and this is scheduled to be completed in early 2025<sup>88</sup>.

## 1.12 Rural Policy Framework

With regards to rural policy, DAERA has been actively engaged over recent years in developing a rural policy framework to:

*'...support a fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life and opportunities as everyone else in Northern Ireland<sup>89</sup>.'*

The process to develop the framework commenced in 2018 with an identification of need exercise which led to stakeholder engagement in 2020 and a public consultation on a draft framework in 2021.

The finalised framework was published in March 2022<sup>90</sup> and was based upon five thematic pillars that had a number of associated interventions. Both the pillars and intervention were linked to outcomes within the Programme for Government. All of this information is set out in table 2 below.

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<sup>87</sup> [AQW 10528/22-27](#)

<sup>88</sup> [AQW 12403/22-27](#)

<sup>89</sup> [DAERA, Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland overview](#)

<sup>90</sup> [DAERA, Rural Policy Framework for NI \(March 2022\)](#)

Table 5: Rural Policy Framework provisions<sup>91</sup>

Thematic Pillar	Programme for Government Outcomes	Interventions
Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship to create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.	<p>Outcome 1: We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.</p> <p>Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment.</p> <p>Outcome 5: We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.</p> <p>Outcome 6: We have more people working in better jobs.</p>	<p>Intervention 1 – Champion: Support and foster the rural culture of innovation.</p> <p>Intervention 2 – Empower: Raise awareness, build capacity and capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation.</p> <p>Intervention 3 – Enable: Invest in and develop our rural economy.</p>
Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism  To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.	<p>Outcome 1: We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.</p> <p>Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment.</p> <p>Outcome 10: We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.</p>	<p>Intervention 1 – Visitor: Encourage and support the delivery of compelling year-round, authentic visitor products and experiences of a quality that will provide international stand out for NI.</p> <p>Intervention 2 – Industry: Support a rural tourism sector that is commercially focused and achieves</p>

Thematic Pillar	Programme for Government Outcomes	Interventions
		<p>sustainable levels of growth and prosperity.</p> <p>Intervention 3 – Community: Facilitate welcoming and supportive rural communities.</p> <p>to play an enhanced role in developing and managing tourism in their locality, thereby strengthening, benefitting and enriching local areas.</p> <p>Intervention 4 – Environment: Recognise, value, protect and enhance Northern Ireland’s natural, cultural and historic built environment as the cornerstone of its rural tourism.</p>
<p>Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing.</p> <p>To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.</p>	<p>Outcome 3: We have a more equal society.</p> <p>Outcome 4: We enjoy long, healthy, active lives.</p> <p>Outcome 5: We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.</p>	<p>Intervention 1 – Champion: Champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness.</p> <p>Intervention 2 – Build Capacity: Support a rural dimension within the work of other organisations which are promoting positive</p>

Thematic Pillar	Programme for Government Outcomes	Interventions
	<p>Outcome 8: We care for others and we help those in need.</p> <p>Outcome 9: We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity.</p> <p>Outcome 11: We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.</p> <p>Outcome 12: We give our children and young people the best start in life.</p>	<p>health and wellbeing, addressing social exclusion, isolation and loneliness and build the capacity of rural organisations and people to develop their activities in this area.</p> <p>Intervention 3 – Reduce: Establish effective approaches to reducing loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of social isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.</p> <p>Intervention 4 – Sustain: Sustain the future viability of villages as residential, social and economic centres.</p> <p>Intervention 5 – Community Assets: Support the strategic development of existing rural community assets as places where people can meet, interact, access services and enhance their health and wellbeing.</p>
Thematic Pillar 4: Employment	Outcome 1: We prosper through a strong,	Intervention 1 – Support: To promote rural prosperity by providing

Thematic Pillar	Programme for Government Outcomes	Interventions
To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.	<p>competitive, regionally balanced economy.</p> <p>Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment.</p> <p>Outcome 3: We have a more equal society.</p> <p>Outcome 6: We have more people working in better jobs.</p> <p>Outcome 12: We give our children and young people the best start in life.</p>	<p>support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability and growth.</p> <p>Intervention 2 – Champion: To champion the need to address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers.</p> <p>Intervention 3 – Invest: To invest in and develop our rural society.</p>
<p>Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity</p> <p>To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.</p>	<p>Outcome 1: We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.</p> <p>Outcome 2: We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment.</p> <p>Outcome 3: We have a more equal society.</p> <p>Outcome 11: We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.</p>	<p>Intervention 1 – Transport: To support sustainable public transport services between rural areas and urban centres and encourage active and public transport usage that better meets the needs of rural dwellers.</p> <p>Intervention 2 – Connectivity: To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres.</p> <p>Intervention 3 – Broadband: To support improved</p>



Thematic Pillar	Programme for Government Outcomes	Interventions
		<p>telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live.</p> <p>Intervention 4 – Access: To reduce barriers to accessing services in rural areas.</p>

The actual implementation of these interventions will be the responsibility of a range of government departments, but DAERA has the lead role and overall responsibility. Oversight and monitoring will be provided by a cross-cutting Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee comprising senior managers from Departments and a range of stakeholders representing organisations with an interest in issues affecting rural communities.

The published policy framework also includes reference to a key future task in terms of implementation, namely developing individual schemes into a new Programme entitled ‘Rural Business and Community Investment Programme’.

The Programme, which was planned to launch in 2022, was anticipated to last for a minimum of 7 years to:

*facilitate meaningful outcomes and to tie into the multi-year budget approach outlined in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. Any Programme and associated interventions require sufficient budgets and delivery mechanisms to realise the Framework’s overarching vision and aim. The interventions should also complement each other and be strategic in both development and delivery.*

DAERA identified a number of pilot schemes that had been implemented at the time of the publication of the policy framework in March 2022 as follows<sup>92</sup>:

- Website Development Programme;
- Rural Tourism Collaborative Experiences;
- Rural Micro Business Growth Scheme;
- Rural Social Economy Investment Scheme;
- Micro Food Business Investment Scheme;
- Rural Halls Refurbishment Scheme; and
- Rural Community Pollinator Garden Scheme.

An exact assessment of the scale and status of these pilot schemes has proven challenging. An answer to an Assembly question in October 2022 suggested that a Rural Halls Refurbishment Scheme was active in 2022 with 74 Letters of Offer having been issued to a value of £2.53 million. A further 33 Letters of Offer to the value of £1.17 million were expected to issue to the remaining eligible applicants before the end of 2022.

### 1.12.1 Latest developments

DAERA Minister Andrew Muir MLA confirmed in an answer to an Assembly question in July 2024 that £291,000 funding has been allocated by DAERA in the 2024-25 financial year towards the final Rural Policy Framework pilot<sup>93</sup>.

Minister Muir also used his answer to this question to announce the establishment of a new Rural Policy Unit within DAERA. This unit has been tasked with developing future rural policy for Northern Ireland following the UK's exit from the EU and which will consider the learning from the 11 pilots developed under the Rural Policy Framework.

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<sup>92</sup> [DAERA, Rural Policy Framework for NI \(March 2022\) p18](#)

<sup>93</sup> [AQW 14201/22-27](#)

This development suggests that the previous Rural Policy Framework is now defunct. DAERA's 2024-35 Business Plan appears to support this analysis as action 33 within the plan commits DAERA to the following by 31 March 2025<sup>94</sup>:

*We will deliver better outcomes for rural communities by developing for consultation a new, evidence-based rural policy.*

## 2 Overall observations and questions

### 2.1 Observations

Reflecting on the information contained within section one of this paper a number of issues stand out.

Firstly, the origins of rural policy development and support in Northern Ireland are tied to anti-poverty work that was linked to the Department of Health and Social Services. The attribution of rural issues and their resolution to DANI/DARD/DAERA appears to have largely come about through the emergence of Rural Development at an EU level and the local response to this policy direction.

Given the broader genesis for rural policy, programmes and support, it is interesting to note the growing trend between 1985-2024 for DANI/DARD/DAERA to be seen as primarily responsible for rural areas and their citizens.

Another clear trend over the time period considered has been the impact of funding within rural communities here. Both the Rural Development and PEACE Programmes have seen considerable investment in rural communities and their people. Rural Development funding was also significant in that it enabled a wider definition of rural support that saw farming, rural enterprises and wider rural community infrastructure and services benefitting. This essentially shattered the impression in some circles that rural meant farming and nothing else.

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<sup>94</sup> [DAERA Business Plan 2023-24 \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://daera-ni.gov.uk/business-plan-2023-24)

The animation work within rural communities in the 1990s that supported the creation of extensive community infrastructure and community groups, undoubtedly empowered these communities to both identify, articulate and lobby on issues that were impacting them. Whilst some of these needs were addressed by localised and individual funded projects of both a capital and revenue nature, there was recognition that wider societal issues impacting rural Northern Ireland required a more co-ordinated and regional response.

To this end, the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, with many MLAs from rural constituencies, undoubtedly sparked a period of consideration and debate around how rural communities and their needs were being served. Drawing upon both local and experience from other jurisdictions, the early to mid 2000s were marked by efforts to both define what rural was whilst also seeking to ensure that the needs of rural communities were being considered in policy development and service delivery.

The work that DARD/DAERA undertook on rural proofing in particular undoubtedly raised awareness amongst all Executive departments and other public bodies of the need to consider the needs of rural communities, whilst also equipping them with methods to actually do it.

In their 'rural champion' role, DARD/DAERA also secured engagement from rural stakeholders and Executive departments in the process of developing a Rural White Paper Action Plan. The significance of this process was that it also secured individual departmental commitments to rural communities, and also established an annual progress reporting regime that saw four reports laid in the Assembly up until June 2016.

The partnership approach amongst Executive Departments developed through the Rural White Paper Action Plan also had a resonance with the Executive's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework which was published in 2008 and ultimately led to DAERA developing and delivering the TRPSI programme of support.

There have also been notable legislative developments delivered by the Assembly that have raised the profile of rural areas and issues and placed

associated duties upon public bodies. The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, which created a statutory duty on councils to produce and implement community planning through the production of Community Plans, and the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which effectively embedded and extended rural proofing, are notable milestones.

Recent years have seen a degree of uncertainty around funding streams across Government in a post Brexit world. Whilst PEACE funding is still with us, dedicated and ring-fenced Rural Development monies have effectively ceased to exist. These new realities have been reflected by DAERA's efforts to formulate a cohesive and comprehensive approach to rural policy and funding, but the time of writing it would appear that any definitive strategy or framework may be some way off and questions still remain around resourcing.

Ironically, in terms of certainty around funding, DAERA's TRPSI programme has funding until the end of 2024, and so in some ways, current action around rural policy/support is back where it began in mid 1980s as a response to rural poverty and social inclusion issues.

## 2.2 Potential questions

Drawing upon the information presented in this paper there are a number potential questions in relation to the future of rural policy as follows:

- What does rural policy cover and how is it best delivered?
- Should DAERA lead on rural policy and delivery? Can it continue to do so given budgetary pressures and its relatively narrow remit as a Department?
- Is DAERA still committed to being the 'rural champion'? If yes, what does it see as the key functions/responsibilities of this role?
- If DAERA didn't lead on and fund rural policy and support what difference would it make? Would other Departments take on the responsibility?
- Will rural policy and support continue to be broad in definition and application? Should it continue to constitute more than farming in Northern Ireland?

- Should all public policy and programmes make specific rural policy provisions or is there a need for a dedicated and separate rural policy space?
- Has rural policy been mainstreamed as a result of rural proofing, the Rural Needs Act and Rural White Paper action plan developments? Does the available evidence support this analysis? Is there a need for further intervention or sanction?
- The development of rural policy and delivery here was undoubtedly driven and supported by significant grant funding and support. Have we now moved beyond that need – moving forward can rural policy and delivery function without financial support or grant programmes?
- Given the role of grant support in establishing much of the community development infrastructure in rural communities what does the uncertainty around future rural funding mean for the future of many of these organisations?
- Given the lack of Rural White Paper Action Plan activity since 2016 does DAERA have any plans to complete the review of this work that had been scheduled for 2017? Will the findings of any such review feed into the development of the future rural policy scheduled for completion by March 2025?
- Is there a need or the appetite for a new Rural White Paper Action Plan?
- Are there any plans to conduct a review into the operation and effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act?
- Has the duty to give ‘due regard’ to the needs of rural meant that proposed policy changes impacting on rural communities been changed? Is there evidence to substantiate this beyond the number of rural needs impacts assessments published in the annual rural needs monitoring report?
- Is there a need for a review of the Community Planning process and associated community plans with specific regards to the consideration of need, participation and outcomes for rural communities?

- Given the current community planning processes and resources within local government, how will any future rural policy ensure complementarity between central and local government?
- How extensive will the remit of the new rural policy unit in DAERA, and the ultimate policy it produces, be? Will any associated themes or issues be cross cutting in terms of responsibility? What are the terms of reference for the development of the new policy?
- How will the development of DAERA's new rural policy by March 2025 draw upon the lessons learned since 1985?
- What are the terms of reference for the review into TRPSI that is scheduled to complete in early 2025? Are there plans to conduct an impact assessment looking at what would happen if DAERA ceased to provide this support?

## Annex 1 – Rural Policy provisions in neighbouring jurisdictions

Table 6 below provides an overview of current policy and support provisions in GB and Ireland as they relate to rural communities.

Annex 1 – Table 6

	<b>England</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Wales</b>
<b>Rural definition</b>	2011 Rural Classification <sup>95</sup> – settlements less than 10,000 people.	Settlements with populations less than 1,500 are rural. <sup>96</sup>	Settlements with populations less than 3,000 <sup>97</sup> .	2011 Rural Classification <sup>98</sup> – settlements less than 10,000 people.
<b>Rural Specific Legislation</b>	Legacy legislation largely linked to delivery of EU CAP funding.  UK Agriculture Act (2020) <sup>99</sup> – has rural	2021 PMB – Rural Equality Bill <sup>100</sup> – has not progressed beyond second stage. <sup>101</sup>	Legacy legislation largely linked to delivery of EU CAP funding.  Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland)	Legacy legislation largely linked to delivery of EU CAP funding.  UK Agriculture Act (2020) <sup>103</sup> – has rural

<sup>95</sup> [The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Output Areas in England, Government Statistical Service](#)

<sup>96</sup> [Urban and Rural Life in Ireland, 2019, Central Statistics Office.](#)

<sup>97</sup> [Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2016](#)

<sup>98</sup> [The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Output Areas in England, Government Statistical Service](#)

<sup>99</sup> [Agriculture Act 2020](#)

<sup>100</sup> [Rural Equality Bill 2021](#)

<sup>101</sup> [History of this Bill, Rural Equality Bill 2021, Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

<sup>103</sup> [Agriculture Act 2020](#)



	England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales
	development support provisions.		Act 2024 <sup>102</sup> – has elements relating to enabling rural development support.	development support provisions.
<b>Structures/organisations</b>	English Rural Network Countryside Agency Natural England	Irish Rural Link <sup>104</sup> Cap Network Ireland <sup>105</sup>	Scottish Rural Network <sup>106</sup>	Rural Affairs Wales <sup>107</sup>
<b>Recent Policy developments</b>	Rural White Paper “Rural England: A Nation Committed to a	Charter for Rural Ireland 2016 <sup>109</sup>	Commitment to deliver a rural delivery plan by 2026 as part of Equality,	Future Wales – The National Plan 2040 <sup>113</sup> – extensive rural

<sup>102</sup> [Agriculture and Rural Communities \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#)

<sup>104</sup> [Irish Rural Link website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>105</sup> [CAP Network Ireland website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>106</sup> [Scottish Rural Network website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>107</sup> [Rural Affairs Wales website, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>109</sup> [Status of Commitments, Charter for Rural Ireland, Department of Rural and Community Development](#)

<sup>113</sup> [Future Wales, The National Plan 2040, Welsh Government](#)

	England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales
	<p>Living Countryside” was published in 1995.</p> <p>Unleashing rural opportunity 2023 – UK-wide but England specific elements such as housing.<sup>108</sup></p>	<p>Our Rural Future, Rural Development Policy 2021-2025<sup>110</sup></p>	<p>opportunity, community New leadership – A fresh start 2023.<sup>111</sup></p> <p>Rural Delivery Plan – Ministerial working group established and working.<sup>112</sup></p>	<p>references and commitments.</p>
<b>Rural Proofing</b>	<p>Yes<sup>114</sup> – three overall reports published in</p>	<p>Yes – has been a requirement in government’s cabinet</p>	<p>Yes – Scottish Government has a commitment to mainstreaming the</p>	<p>Yes</p>

<sup>108</sup> [Unleashing rural opportunity, Policy Paper, UK Government \(applies to England\), 6 June 2023](#)

<sup>110</sup> [Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, Department of Rural and Community Development](#)

<sup>111</sup> [Equality, Opportunity, Community, New leadership - a fresh start, Scottish Government, April 2023](#)

<sup>112</sup> [Rural Delivery Plan: Ministerial Working Group, Scottish Government webpage, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>114</sup> [Delivering for rural England –the second report on rural proofing, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

	England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales
	2021 <sup>115</sup> , 2022 <sup>116</sup> and 2024. <sup>117</sup>	handbook since 2006-section 3.4(viii) <sup>118</sup>  Proposals for further development in 2022. <sup>119</sup>	needs of rural areas within all of its policies.  Also Island Community Impact Assessments (ICIAs) requirement under Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. <sup>120</sup>	
<b>Rural Funding</b>	Rural England Prosperity Fund 2023-25 – £110 million	The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	Agricultural support commitments but lack of	Agricultural support commitments but lack of

<sup>115</sup> [Rural proofing in England 2020, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

<sup>116</sup> [Delivering for rural England –the second report on rural proofing, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

<sup>117</sup> [Delivering rural opportunity: third report on rural proofing, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, 18 March 2024](#)

<sup>118</sup> [Cabinet Handbook, Department of the Taoiseach, page 30](#)

<sup>119</sup> [Proposals for an effective Rural Proofing model for Ireland, William Parnell & Ciaran Lynch, Report commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development, April 2022](#)

<sup>120</sup> [Islands \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#)

	<b>England</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Wales</b>
	<p>budget<sup>121</sup> – capital funding for rural business and community infrastructure.</p> <p>Future farm funding subject to decisions by new UK Government.</p>	<p>(RRDF)<sup>122</sup> – €1 billion over the period 2019 to 2027.<sup>123</sup></p>	<p>specific figure<sup>124</sup> – less clarity on wider rural development funding.</p> <p>Future farm funding subject to decisions by new Government.</p>	<p>specific figure<sup>125</sup> – less clarity on wider rural development funding.</p> <p>Future farm funding subject to decisions by new Government.</p>

<sup>121</sup> [£110m fund to level up rural communities unveiled, Press release, UK Government, 3 September 2022](#)

<sup>122</sup> [Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, Department of Rural and Community Development webpage, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy/ac9ee6-action-plan-for-rural-development/>

<sup>124</sup> [Agricultural Reform Route Map webpage, Scottish Government, 16 September 2024](#)

<sup>125</sup> [Sustainable Framing Scheme consultation, Welsh Government, 7 March 2024](#)