

Written Ministerial Statement

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Seventh Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report

Published at 12.30pm on Friday 23 May 2025

Mr Andrew Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): In accordance with Section 3(2) of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (The Act), my department laid the seventh Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report before the Assembly on 4 April 2025. The report has been published on my department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 was established to ensure that public authorities have due regard to the social and economic needs of dwellers in rural areas when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services.

Rural communities face a myriad of challenges that differ significantly from those in urban areas. It is crucial to recognise that these challenges vary depending on factors such as age demographic, affluence, or geographical location and distance from essential services. These challenges include increased living costs, fuel poverty, feelings of social isolation and loneliness, difficulties in accessing services like public transport to hospitals, mental health support, and affordable childcare to support parents into employment. Rurality may further exacerbate these issues for members of rural communities with specific needs protected under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Public authorities must consider these differences during the policymaking process to ensure equitable outcomes for those who live, work, visit and operate businesses in our rural areas.

Since the Act's commencement, the number of completed Rural Needs Impact Assessments has risen from 157 to 586, demonstrating public authorities' strong commitment to understanding the impact of their policies on rural communities. It is encouraging to see within this report, a number of policies with a positive impact that will help improve the lives of those who live and work in rural areas. It is vital that policymakers continue to show an understanding of, and take into account, the specific characteristics of rural areas.

During the reporting period, my officials supported public authorities by delivering intensive classroom-based training courses for Rural Needs Co-ordinators, ensuring they have the knowledge and expertise required to perform their roles effectively. The Rural Needs section of the DAERA website provides a range of resources to support decision makers, including guidance, rural statistics, and a rural research and information hub.

My officials also facilitated meetings of the Rural Needs Network, inviting all public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act. The network enables DAERA to engage directly with public authorities and facilitates co-operation and information exchange to improve their regard to rural communities.

I recognise the importance of DAERA working in partnership with other departments, local councils and public authorities to address the particular needs of rural communities. My department will continue to provide support to public authorities in implementing the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all public authorities for their contributions, co-operation and willingness to engage with my department in compiling this report. I am committed to enhancing the quality of life for those living and working in rural areas, helping communities reach their full potential, as thriving, vibrant places to live and work.