

Report on the Review of the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

January 2020

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Foreword by the Chairperson

I am pleased to present this report on the review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 which was undertaken by the Rural Needs Working Group during the period October to December 2019.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is a key rural policy tool for DAERA in seeking to ensure that the needs of people in rural areas are routinely considered by public authorities when carrying out their functions and is one of a suite of rural policy initiatives led by DAERA designed to help deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

DAERA recognises that the needs of people in rural areas can be different to those in urban areas and that the impact of a policy can have a different impact on people in rural areas due to the different circumstances pertaining to rural areas. It also recognises that rural areas are not homogeneous and that a one size fits all approach by government is not always appropriate. It is important therefore that public authorities are open to considering different approaches and tailored solutions in respect of rural areas in order to deliver more equitable outcomes for rural dwellers.

The purpose of the review was to look at how the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was being implemented by public authorities and to consider what further support measures might be introduced to help public authorities comply with the legislation. It is recognised that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 has only been in place a short time and therefore 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.

The review carried out by the working group is an important step in the implementation of the Act and I believe that the acceptance of the recommendations made by the working group will help ensure that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is implemented more consistently and effectively by public authorities going forward.

The review was an intensive piece of work which required considerable dedication in order to deliver the objectives set out in the Terms of Reference and I am pleased that this report has been delivered within the required deadline.

I would like to thank all those who participated in the working group for the creativity and experience which they brought to the project. I am also grateful for the commitment and enthusiasm which they demonstrated in taking forward the work and for the constructive and convivial atmosphere in which the meetings were conducted. There was a clear willingness on the part of the public authority

representatives on the working group to seek to ensure that the legislation was implemented effectively within their organisation and a clear commitment from all members of the working group for DAERA, other public authorities and rural stakeholders to work together to help deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

The report contains a total of 25 recommendations covering all sections of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and while the majority relate specifically to DAERA there are a number which relate to other public authorities. I believe that the recommendations can make a positive difference to how the legislation is implemented and I hope that they will be accepted.

CHAIR OF THE RURAL NEEDS WORKING GROUP

Executive Summary

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 places a statutory duty on Northern Ireland departments, district councils and certain other public authorities in Northern Ireland to have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas in the development, implementation, revision and adoption of policies, strategies and plans and in the design and delivery of public services. The Act came into operation for departments and councils in June 2017 and for the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act in June 2018.

In September 2019 DAERA established a working group to undertake a review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for the purposes of assessing how the legislation was being implemented by public authorities to date and identifying what further support measures might be introduced to help public authorities comply with the legislation. The Terms of Reference for the review set seven specific objectives for the working group to address as part of the review. In undertaking the review the working group collected evidence from a wide range of public authorities and rural stakeholders in order to ensure that the recommendations resulting from the review were evidence based.

The review found that there continues to be a lack of awareness among some decision makers of the need to comply with the due regard duty and a lack of understanding of among some decision makers as to what a public authority is required to do specifically in order to fulfil the due regard duty. It also found that lack of access to the information necessary to inform decision makers of the needs of people in rural areas was a key barrier to implementing the due regard duty. The review also found that not all decision makers were complying with the guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 in relation to the carrying out of Rural Needs Impact Assessments and that there was evidence that the completion of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment Template was sometimes being viewed as a 'tick box' exercise;

In seeking to address the findings from the review the working group has made 25 recommendations covering all aspects of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. These include recommendations on increasing awareness of the legislation, new measures to help public authorities comply with the legislation, improving the monitoring and reporting procedures, improving access to statistical information and new measures to facilitate better co-operation between public authorities. A full list of the recommendations is provided at Appendix 1 of the report.

Section 1

Introduction and Background

Introduction

- 1.1. The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (the Act) places a statutory duty on departments, district councils and certain other public authorities in Northern Ireland to have due regard to rural needs in the development, implementation, revision and adoption of policies, strategies and plans and in the design and delivery of public services (section 1 activities).
- 1.2. The Act came into operation for departments and district councils in June 2017 and for the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act in June 2018. While departments in Northern Ireland had previously been signed up to the Northern Ireland Executive's policy on rural proofing, the introduction of the Act meant that for the first time in Northern Ireland the consideration of the needs of people in rural areas had been placed on a statutory footing.
- 1.3. In July 2019 DAERA took a decision to undertake a review of the implementation of the Act with a view to determining how the legislation was being implemented by public authorities and to identifying any further measures that might to be taken to help public authorities comply with the requirements of the legislation. By this stage the Act had been in operation for 2 years for departments and district councils and for 1 year for the other public authorities. As the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 had only been in place for a short time, the review focussed on how the legislation was being implemented by public authorities and on the support measures provided by DAERA rather than on the policy and delivery outcomes resulting from the legislation.
- 1.4. The Department subsequently established a Rural Needs Working group to undertake the review which was made up of representatives from DAERA, other departments, local councils, other public authorities, academia and rural stakeholder organisations. This report sets out the findings from the review and the recommendations made by the working group.

Background to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Rural Proofing

- 1.5. The Northern Ireland Executive first made a commitment to rural proofing in 2002 with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) being the department with responsibility for rural proofing in Northern Ireland. The NI Executive's policy on rural proofing only applied to government departments in

Northern Ireland and did not extend to other public authorities although some public authorities did adopt rural proofing voluntarily during this period.

- 1.6. In 2009 DARD brought forward proposals to the NI Executive to reinvigorate rural proofing which resulted in the introduction of rural proofing training and the publishing of revised guidance 'Thinking Rural: The Essential Guide to Rural Proofing' in 2011. However despite this reinvigoration of rural proofing concerns continued to be raised around the implementation of rural proofing by Departments, particularly around how effectively rural proofing was being implemented by Departments and what was perceived as a lack of transparency on how rural proofing was being implemented across Departments.

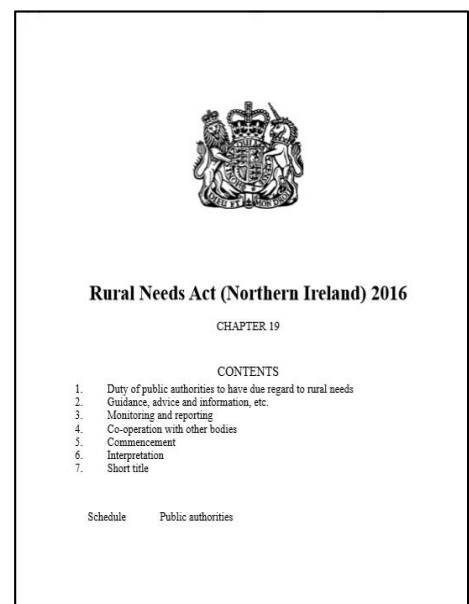
Rural Needs Bill

- 1.7. In 2015 proposals were brought forward for a Rural Needs Bill which aimed to ensure that public authorities consider the needs of people in rural areas when undertaking certain activities and to provide greater transparency on how public authorities consider rural needs in respect of these activities. The Rural Needs Bill received Royal Assent in May 2016 and became the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

Rural Needs Act

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

- 1.9. The Act places a duty on departments, local councils and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act to have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas in the development, implementation, revision and adoption of policies, strategies and plans and in the design and delivery of public services. The Act came into operation for departments and district councils in June 2017 and for the other public authorities in June 2018.



1.10. The Act also requires public authorities to compile information on how they have exercised the due regard duty and to send that information to DAERA and for DAERA to publish the information sent to it in an annual report and to lay the report before the Assembly. DAERA published the 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report on its website in December 2019.

1.11. The policy implemented by the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 differs from the Executive’s previous policy on rural proofing in that the Act imposes a **statutory** obligation on public authorities to have due regard to rural needs rather than the **non-statutory** commitment to rural proof which departments were previously signed up to. The scope of the Act is also wider than the scope of the previous policy on rural proofing in that it applies to **policies, strategies, plans** and **public services** rather than just polices and strategies; it also applies to **district councils** and **certain other public authorities** rather than just government departments. The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 effectively superseded the Executive’s previous policy on rural proofing and therefore DAERA no longer uses the term ‘rural proofing’.

Rural Needs Act - Timeline of Events
March 2016 – Rural Needs Bill receives Royal Assent
April 2017 – Roll out of Awareness Training to Public Authorities commences
June 2017 – RNA comes into operation for Departments and Councils (Phase 1)
June 2017 – Guidance on RNA published
January 2018 – Review of Phase 1 Implementation
April 2018 – Revised Guidance on RNA published
June 2018 – RNA comes into operation for other Public Authorities (Phase 2)
December 2018 – 1 st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report Published
September 2019 – Working Group established to undertake review of the implementation of the RNA
December 2019 – 2 nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report Published
February 2020 – Report on Review of the Implementation of the RNA submitted

Background to the Review

1.12. DAERA took a decision to undertake a review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 in June 2019, two years after the Act first came into operation for departments and district councils and one year after it came into operation for the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act. The main purpose of the review was look at how the legislation was being implemented by public authorities and to identify any further measures that might be taken to help public authorities comply with the requirements of the legislation.

1.13. The review also provided an opportunity to evaluate the support measures which DAERA had put in place to assist public authorities implement the Act and to evaluate the effectiveness of the monitoring and reporting arrangements which DAERA had put in place with a view to identify any improvements that could be made. It also provided the first formal opportunity for public authorities to provide feedback to DAERA on their experiences of implementing the legislation and to highlight any issues of concern and for rural stakeholders to provide their perspective on the implementation of the legislation particularly in relation to the issues such as stakeholder engagement and transparency.

Terms of Reference for the Review

1.14. Terms of Reference for the review were drawn up by DAERA which incorporated seven specific objectives. These objectives included undertaking reviews of the implementation of section 1(1) of the Act and of the monitoring and reporting arrangements and making recommendations. Details of these objectives are set out at Appendix 2 of this report.

1.15. The Terms of Reference required the working group to provide a written report to DAERA's Director of Rural Affairs by 14th February 2020 setting out the findings arising from the review, the barriers and potential barriers to the effective implementation of section 1(1) of the Act and the recommendations put forward by the working group.

1.16. The Terms of Reference also committed the working group to adopting an evidence based approach to the review and to engaging widely with interested parties.

Roles and Responsibilities of DAERA

1.17. DAERA is the department in Northern Ireland with responsibility for rural affairs. As part of its rural affairs the department leads on a range of rural policy initiatives aimed at delivering better outcomes for rural communities including the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-20, the Rural White Paper Action Plan and the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework.

- 1.18. As the Department with responsibility for the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, DAERA provides support to other public authorities to help them comply with the requirements of the legislation including the provision of advice, guidance and information, the delivery of training and the hosting of co-operation events. Full details of the support measures provided by DAERA are set out in Section 3 of this report.
- 1.19. While DAERA provides support to public authorities, responsibility for complying with their statutory duties under the Act lies with individual public authorities and DAERA has no role in enforcing the legislation.
- 1.20. DAERA also has responsibility under the legislation for publishing an annual report containing information compiled by public authorities on how they have exercised the due regard duty and to lay this report before the Assembly. DAERA published its 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report on its website in December 2019.
- 1.21. In addition DAERA also has a duty to make arrangements with public authorities with a view to securing co-operation and the exchange of information and to review the list of public authorities to which the Act applies at least every 3 years. DAERA also has powers to provide advice, guidance and information on rural needs and to undertake, commission or support (by financial means or otherwise) research into any matter relating to rural needs.

Section 2

Methodology

Introduction

2.1. The review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was undertaken by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs during the period September 2019 - January 2020. The key stages in the review are set out below.

Establishment of Working Group

2.2. In September 2019 DAERA established a Rural Needs Working Group to undertake the review. The working group consisted of representatives of DAERA, other departments, district councils, academia, rural stakeholder organisations and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. The membership of the working group was as follows:

Rural Needs Working Group Membership		
Newry Mourne & Down District Council	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Department of Finance
Education Authority	Department for Infrastructure	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
Rural Action	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	Rural Community Network
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs		South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust

2.3. Terms of Reference for the working group were drawn up by DAERA which set the working group seven specific objectives including undertaking a review of the implementation of section 1(1) of the Act and undertaking a review of the monitoring and reporting arrangements. Details of the objectives for the review are set out in Appendix 2 of this report.

2.4. The working group met four times as part of the formal review process while a number of informal meetings between DAERA and individual working group members also took place. The working group also operated as a pilot group for the piloting of a new training course on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 which has

been developed by DAERA and aims to support rural needs co-ordinators in public authorities.

Gathering of Information

2.5. The working group gathered information to inform the review from a range of sources including the following.

- A questionnaire for public authorities (Appendix 3) which was issued to all departments, councils and other public authorities listed in the schedule to the Act. A total of 16 responses were received equating to a return rate of approximately 42%.
- A questionnaire for rural stakeholders (Appendix 3) which was issued to over 200 rural stakeholder organisations represented by the Rural Community Network with a total of 47 responses received.
- A sample of 11 Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) templates that had been published on line. The sample of RNIA templates included templates completed by departments, district councils and other public authorities.
- The 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report published in December 2018 and the returns submitted by public authorities in respect of the 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report which was subsequently published in December 2019.

Timeline for the Review
September 2019 – Working Group established to undertake the Review
September 2019 – Questionnaire issued to Public Authorities
October 2019 – 1 st Meeting of Working Group
October 2019 – Questionnaire issued to Rural Stakeholders
October 2019 – Draft Findings Paper issued
November 2019 – 2 nd Meeting of Working Group
November 2019 – Draft Recommendations Paper 1 issued (Objectives 2, 3 & 5)
November 2019 – 3 rd Meeting of Working Group
November 2019 – Rural Needs Act - Training for Rural Needs Co-ordinators Pilot
November 2019 – Draft Recommendations Paper 2 issued (Objectives 4, 6 & 7)
December 2019 – 4 th Meeting of Working Group
January 2020 – Draft Report on Review issued to Working Group Members
January 2020 – Draft Report on Review formally agreed by Working Group Members

- Oral evidence taken from members at the first meeting of the Working Group on 3rd October 2019.

Analysis of Information

2.6. The information gathered was collated and presented to the working group in the form of a paper titled “*Evidence used to inform the Review of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016*”. This paper incorporated:

- The results of the questionnaire Issued to Public Authorities
- The results of the questionnaire Issued to Rural Stakeholders
- Links to the sample of 11 Rural Needs Impact Assessment Templates
- A link to the 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report
- A copy of the questionnaire issued to Public Authorities
- A copy of the questionnaire issued to Rural Stakeholders
- A summary of the evidence provided by working group members at the 1st meeting of the working group.

2.7. An analysis of the evidence was undertaken by a sub group of the working group and included assessments of the sample of RNIA Templates and of the monitoring information submitted in respect of the 1st and 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Reports and reviews of the implementation of the due regard duty and of the monitoring and reporting arrangements.

2.8. The outcome of the work of the sub-group was presented to members of the working group in the form of a paper titled “*Draft Findings from the Review of the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016*”. This paper incorporated the findings from both the review of the implementation of section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and the review of the monitoring and reporting arrangements as required under the Terms of Reference.

2.9. The draft findings paper was discussed and agreed by the working group at its 2nd meeting and provided the evidence to inform the development of the working group’s subsequent recommendations.

2.10. The findings from the review are set out in Section 4 of this report.

Section 3

Measures to support the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Introduction

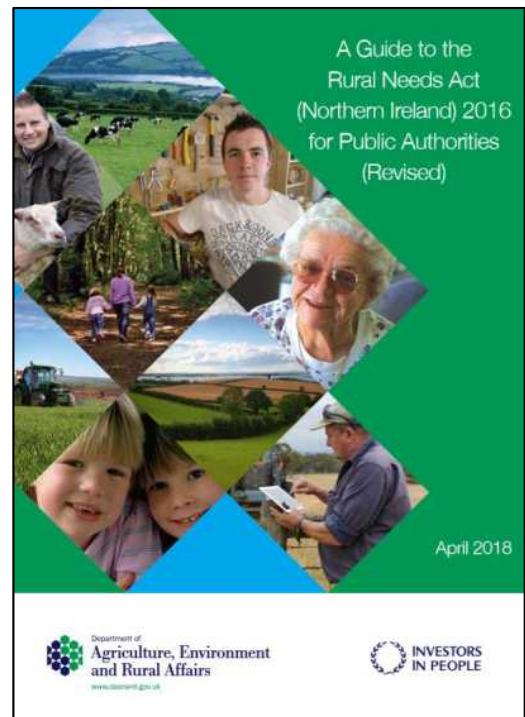
3.1. As the department with responsibility for the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, DAERA put in place a range of measures to help public authorities prepare for the commencement of the legislation and to support public authorities in implementing the legislation after it came into operation. A summary of these measures is set out below.

Guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

3.2. DAERA published revised guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 in April 2018 - *A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) for Public Authorities (Revised)*. The guidance is designed to help public authorities understand their duties under the Act and to help ensure they fulfil their obligations under the legislation.

3.3. The guidance recommends the undertaking of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in respect of those activities which fall within the scope of section 1(1) of the Act.

3.4. This revised guidance replaced previous guidance issued by DAERA in May 2017.



Guidance on completing the 'Appendix 2 Template'

3.5. DAERA issued guidance in April 2019 to assist public authorities with completing the 'Template for Compiling Information' provided at Appendix 2 of the guidance. The purpose of this guidance is to help improve the quality and consistency of the information submitted by public authorities for inclusion in the annual monitoring report and to help ensure that the information submitted is meaningful and relevant.

Awareness Training for Public Authorities

3.6. DAERA arranged for awareness training to be provided for all public authorities prior to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 coming into operation which provided a broad overview of the legislation and of the implications that it would have for public authorities.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template

3.7. DAERA included a new RNIA Template as part of its revised guidance document published in April 2018. This new RNIA Template is designed to record the steps taken by public authorities in carrying out a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and provides evidence to help demonstrate that the due regard duty has been complied with.

Information on the DAERA Website

3.8. DAERA provides information on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 on the Rural Needs section of the DAERA website. This includes copies of the guidance, templates, annual monitoring reports and other useful information relating to rural needs.

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development/rural-needs>

E-learning Package

3.9. As part of its preparations for the legislation coming into operation DAERA developed an on line training package for public authorities which provided a broad overview of the implications of the legislation for public authorities.

General Advice and Support

3.10. DAERA's Sustainable Rural Communities Branch provides advice and guidance to public authorities on issues relating to rural needs. This includes advice on undertaking Rural Needs Impact Assessments and completing RNIA Templates. DAERA also provides support to rural needs co-ordinators in public authorities in relation to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

Co-operation Events

3.11. DAERA hosts an annual co-operation event for all public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act. The purpose of these events is to facilitate co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities.

Rural Needs Database

3.12. DAERA has developed a Rural Needs Database to assist public authorities in compiling the information required for the annual monitoring report and to help ensure more accurate reporting. DAERA is currently piloting the database within

DAERA with a view to making the model available to other public authorities in 2020/21.

Internal Measures

3.13. DAERA has implemented a range of internal measures aimed at embedding the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within the department. These include incorporating the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within its audit and risk procedures and its submission templates.

Rural Needs Training

3.14. DAERA has developed a new intensive training course on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 aimed at providing Rural Needs Co-Ordinators with the knowledge and expertise necessary to enable them to provide effective support to their organisation. This training will be made available to Rural Needs Co-Ordinators from April 2020.

Section 4

Findings from the Review of the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Introduction

- 4.1 This section sets out the findings from the review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and incorporates the review of the implementation of section 1(1) of the Act and the review of the monitoring and reporting arrangements as required to be undertaken by the working group under its Terms of Reference. The review also looked at the support provided by DAERA to assist public authorities with implementing the legislation and at the steps taken by DAERA to secure co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities.
- 4.2 The findings have been informed by the evidence available including input from working group members, the responses to a questionnaire issued to all public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act, the responses to a questionnaire issued to rural stakeholders, an assessment of a sample of published Rural Needs Impact Assessment Templates and a review of the returns made by public authorities in respect of the 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report published by DAERA in December 2018 and the 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report which was subsequently published by DAERA in December 2019.
- 4.3 These findings were used to inform the working group in its consideration of the issues set out in its Terms of Reference and provided the evidence for the recommendations made.

Review of the Implementation of Section 1(1)

Awareness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

- 4.4 Most public authorities who responded to the questionnaire indicated that the level of awareness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (the Act) within their organisation is medium or high, however a number indicated that awareness is still low.
- 4.5 There is therefore a need for DAERA to continue to work with public authorities in raising awareness of the Act and to recognise that awareness raising is not a one off event but rather requires an ongoing approach to take account of staff turnover etc. It is noted that the equality legislation has been in place in Northern Ireland for many years and that the Equality Commission continues to hold awareness raising sessions for public authorities. It is also recognised that levels

of awareness may vary within individual public authorities and therefore there is a need to ensure that awareness raising is appropriately targeted within organisations.

- 4.6 While DAERA has developed a range of measures aimed at raising awareness of the Act including the roll out of awareness training for all public authorities, the provision of guidance, access to e-learning and the hosting of co-operation events, there is an opportunity to do more in the way of 'on the ground' promotion activities such as workshops, poster campaigns etc.
- 4.7 The results of the rural stakeholder survey showed that awareness of the Act among rural stakeholders is not particularly high and therefore there is also scope for more to be done by rural stakeholder organisations to help raise awareness among rural stakeholders.

Rural Needs Impact Assessments

- 4.8 The guidance produced by DAERA recommends that public authorities undertake a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in respect of those activities which fall within the scope of section 1(1) of the Act (section 1 activities), namely the development, implementation, adoption and revisions of policies, strategies and plans and the design and delivery of public services. A Rural Needs Impact Assessment is a six step process designed to help ensure that public authorities fulfil the due regard duty.
- 4.9 Information submitted by public authorities for inclusion in the 2nd Annual Monitoring Report indicates that public authorities are routinely completing (RNIA) Templates in respect of section 1 activities. However it is recognised that while the RNIA Template is designed to capture information relevant to each stage of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process, completion of an RNIA Template does not in itself equate to having undertaken a Rural Needs Impact Assessment nor does it equate to having fulfilled the due regard duty.
- 4.10 There is evidence from the review of RNIA Templates that in some cases the completion of the RNIA Template has taken place after the section 1 activity has been completed and that no Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been carried out. There is also evidence that some public authorities have not followed the guidance in some instances (it was reported that one official had enquired if they needed to read the guidance) and that in some cases the completion of the RNIA Template appeared to be treated as a form filling exercise rather than a means of documenting information relevant to the Rural Needs Impact Assessment (it was

reported that one official had enquired as to how quickly the template could be filled in).

4.11 Where public authorities do not follow the guidance and do not undertake a Rural Needs Impact Assessment, there is a risk that the due regard duty will not be fulfilled. There is therefore a need to remind public authorities of the importance of following the guidance and to encourage public authorities to ensure that an appropriate Rural Needs Impact Assessment is undertaken in respect of section 1 activities. There is also merit in raising awareness of the need to commence the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process as early as possible and to work through the process step by step.

Difficulties experienced in undertaking a Rural Needs Impact Assessment

4.12 Some public authorities reported having experienced no difficulties in undertaking Rural Needs Impact Assessments with one reporting that it was a “straight forward process”. However some public authorities have reported experiencing difficulties with the most common difficulty identified as being inability to access the appropriate statistical and other information necessary to inform decision making, including accessing data at local level and obtaining urban-rural statistical breakdowns.

4.13 Other difficulties identified by public authorities include not understanding the social and economic needs relevant to the section 1 activity, not knowing whether a Rural Needs Impact Assessment is required in respect of a particular activity (or at what point it was required) and what needs to be done differently to ensure that the due regard duty is fulfilled.

4.14 There is merit in looking at what more can be done to improve access to statistical and other information for public authorities and in making available good examples of Rural Needs Impact Assessments through the provision of case studies. There is also a need for public authorities to ensure that they are familiar with the guidance and to seek legal advice where appropriate.

Action taken by public authorities to help ensure compliance with the due regard duty

4.15 Public authorities have undertaken a range of internal measures to help ensure that the due regard duty is complied with including awareness raising, the provision of in-house training and the incorporation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 into their communications plans and briefing templates and as an agenda

item at senior management and board meetings. Some organisations have appointed rural needs co-ordinators or have dedicated internal rural units/representatives in place who provide direct support and advice on issues relating to rural needs.

4.16 In some public authorities rural need awareness has been integrated into their equality awareness sessions and into their equality documentation thereby ensuring that the two statutory duties are promoted jointly. Some public authorities have also established a database for compiling information on RNIA Templates to assist with the monitoring process and to help ensure more accurate reporting.

Main barriers to implementing the due regard duty

4.17 Public authorities have identified two main barriers to implementing the due regard duty, namely a lack of understanding/awareness in relation to what public authorities are required to do in order to fulfil the due regard duty and a lack of availability of statistical and other information/evidence to inform their decisions.

4.18 Other barriers identified include treating the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process as a tick box exercise and not considering the due regard duty until the section 1 activity is already well under way. Risk of adopting an inconsistent approach towards completing Rural Needs Impact Assessments was also highlighted as a particular issue. Some public authorities also reported that the absence of a 'screening out' process risked 'rural needs fatigue' due to decision makers having to invest significant time and resources completing RNIA Templates in respect of a considerable number of internal or technical policies which had no potential to impact on people in rural areas.

4.19 Lack of appropriate training and resource pressures were also highlighted as potential barriers to effectively implementing the due regard duty.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Templates

4.20 The RNIA Template is designed to capture information relevant to each stage of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process and helps to provide evidence that a public authority has fulfilled the due regard duty.

4.21 The new RNIA Template provided in the revised guidance was found to be much more user friendly than the previous RNIA Template provided in the previous

version of the guidance and has led to a reduction in requests to DAERA for help with completing the RNIA Template. One public authority stated that the revised RNIA Template “provided a useful step by step guide to aid public authorities through the [Rural Needs Impact Assessment] process”

- 4.22 The review of a sample of RNIA Templates found that completed RNIA Templates were of variable quality with some showing evidence of a detailed Rural Needs Impact Assessment having been carried out while others provided little evidence of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment having been undertaken.
- 4.23 Some Public Authorities have designed their own RNIA Template based on the DAERA RNIA Template while others have combined the DAERA RNIA Template with their Equality Screening Template. In some cases public authorities who combined the EQIA Template with the DAERA RNIA Template were found to be adopting a ‘screening out’ approach to the due regard duty although the rural needs legislation does not provide for the screening out of an activity. It is important that public authorities recognise that the duties under the equality legislation and the rural needs legislation are distinct and separate.
- 4.24 The review also found that some public authorities continued to use the old RNIA Template based on the previous guidance raising questions of how aware some public authorities are of the revised guidance published by DAERA in April 2018 which incorporated a revised RNIA Template.
- 4.25 There was evidence that some public authorities were not following the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process as recommended in the guidance and some concerns that rural needs was being treated merely as a ‘tick box’ or ‘form filling’ exercise. It is important that public authorities are aware that the completion of an RNIA Template does not in itself equate to fulfilling the due regard duty.
- 4.26 There were some good examples of completed RNIA Templates which demonstrated that a detailed Rural Needs Impact Assessment had been undertaken and which provided evidence of how the public authority had sought to identify the needs of people in rural areas, how those needs were considered and how the section 1 activity had been influenced by the rural needs identified. In one case a public authority had set out both the direct and indirect impacts of the public service on people in rural areas.
- 4.27 The evidence from RNIA Templates showed that some public authorities have taken significant steps to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural

areas through a range of methods all of which have been detailed on the RNIA Template. However there are other examples where it was not clear what steps have been taken to identify the needs of people in rural areas as no details had been recorded.

4.28 The RNIA Template is designed to record information relating to the Rural Needs Impact Assessment and should contain sufficient evidence to help demonstrate that the due regard duty has been fulfilled. There is a concern that not following the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process set out in the revised guidance or using an amended RNIA Template that does not include all the steps set out in the process, may result in a public authority not providing sufficient evidence that the due regard duty has been complied with.

4.29 A majority of those RNIA Templates in the sample which had been properly completed indicated that the policy, strategy, plan or public service had been influenced by the rural needs identified. This indicates that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is having a positive impact on how public authorities undertake their functions. This is also supported by the survey of rural stakeholders which showed that some rural stakeholders recognise that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 has made a positive difference in some areas.

4.30 While it is recognised that not every activity will have a particular rural dimension and that there will not always be scope to influence a particular activity there is potential for more to be done to encourage public authorities to take the necessary steps to identify the needs of people in rural areas and to seek to deliver better outcomes for people in rural areas which take account of rural circumstances.

4.31 The review of the sample of RNIA Templates raised some concerns about the contents of some templates and the terminology used. It also appeared that in some cases the focus may have been on “filling the box” rather than giving due consideration to answering the particular question set out in the RNIA Template. It is important for public authorities to be aware of their audience and to use appropriate terminology. It is also important to adopt a proportionate approach to the amount of information contained in an RNIA Template, with the amount of detail proportionate to the potential impact and relevance of the activity, and to ensure that the information provided is easily understood.

4.32 While all of the RNIA Templates sampled were published on line, mostly in relation to a public consultation exercise, it was noted that published RNIA

Templates using the DAERA RNIA Template tended to be better presented than those published using a public authority's own model of the RNIA Template.

4.33 It is recognised that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 only came into operation for departments and district councils in 2017 and other public authorities in 2018 and therefore public authorities are still in a learning process. It is also recognised that the absence of a NI Assembly may have resulted in less scrutiny of RNIA Templates than might otherwise be the case. There is therefore merit in DAERA continuing to work closely with public authorities in seeking to ensure that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 becomes firmly embedded within organisations and that Rural Needs Impact Assessments are carried out and RNIA Templates completed to a satisfactory standard.

Rural Stakeholder Engagement

4.34 While there is evidence that some public authorities have engaged directly with rural stakeholders in seeking to identify the needs of people in rural areas the results of the rural stakeholder survey show that very few rural stakeholder organisations have engaged directly with a public authority in relation to the undertaking of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

4.35 While there continues to be a lack of awareness among rural stakeholders that public authorities routinely undertake Rural Needs Impact Assessments and complete RNIA Templates in respect of their policies, strategies, plans and public services, it is recognised that rural stakeholders are an important source of information both in relation to the challenges facing rural communities and the unique circumstances in rural areas. There is therefore scope for public authorities to engage more effectively with rural stakeholders in seeking to identify the needs of people in rural areas.

4.36 There is also merit in DAERA working with public authorities and rural stakeholders to explore how engagement between public authorities and rural stakeholders can be more effective and help to deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

Review of the support provided by DAERA

Guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

4.37 DAERA published revised guidance (*A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised)*) in April 2018. Public authorities have found the revised guidance to be very useful in assisting them with implementing the Act and a definite improvement on the previous version of the guidance.

4.38 However from the review of the sample of RNIA Templates it is clear that some public authorities are still using the old RNIA Template based on the previous guidance and therefore may not be aware of the *revised* guidance. Some public authorities also reported that the level of awareness of the guidance within their organisation was low and therefore more needs to be done to increase awareness including wider circulation of hard copies of the guidance where available.

4.39 The review showed that public authorities found the *Guidance on completing the Appendix 2 Template* to be useful and helped with the completion of the annual monitoring return. DAERA has noted a marked improvement between the returns submitted by Departments and Councils in respect of the 1st Annual Monitoring Report in 2018 and those submitted in respect of the 2nd Annual Monitoring Report in 2019 and has acknowledged that some of this improvement is due to the issue of the *Guidance on completing the Appendix 2 Template*.

4.40 There may be scope to review the *Guidance on completing the Appendix 2 Template* in light of the 2nd Annual Monitoring Report with a view to identifying any changes that might be made to help further improve the quality of the returns provided.

General Advice and Support provided by DAERA

4.41 DAERA has provided one to one support to public authorities on a range of issues including the implementation of the due regard duty, the completion of RNIA Templates, engagement with rural stakeholders and monitoring and reporting. The review showed that public authorities have found the general advice and support provided by DAERA to be very useful.

Information provided on rural needs on the DAERA Website

4.42 DAERA provides a range of information on rural needs on the 'Rural Needs' section of its website which public authorities have found useful. However there is merit in reviewing the design and content of the website with a view to presenting the information in a more user friendly manner. There is also merit in considering what further information could be provided to assist public authorities in fulfilling their duties under the Act.

Awareness Training

4.43 DAERA arranged for awareness training to be provided to all public authorities in preparation for the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 coming into operation. There were a variety of views on the usefulness of the awareness training with the majority of public authorities finding the awareness sessions useful or very useful. One public authority expressed the view that the awareness training wasn't comprehensive enough however it is recognised that the awareness training was designed to provide public authorities with an overview of their responsibilities under the Act and was not designed to be comprehensive.

4.44 While there is clearly a need for further awareness raising it is recognised that there is a distinction to be made between awareness raising and comprehensive training. It is recognised that for DAERA to make provision for comprehensive training to officials across all public authorities would be very resource intensive. However there is scope for DAERA to provide more comprehensive training for individuals within public authorities whose have specific or dedicated roles or responsibilities in relation to the implementation of the legislation (e.g. Rural Needs Co-ordinators) as part of DAERA's policy of 'supporting public authorities to support themselves'. There are also other options for raising awareness which, together with the provision of guidance and dedicated support for Rural Needs Co-ordinators, can ensure a more effective approach to awareness raising across public authorities.

E-learning

4.45 The rural needs e-learning programme which was made available to departments and local councils in 2016 only provided an 'overview of rural' rather than providing detailed information on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 or on the carrying out of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment. The e-learning programme was based on DAERA's previous guidance and was not updated to reflect the revised guidance published in 2018.

4.46 Feedback showed that 117 people completed the e-learning programme during the period up to 2019 while feedback from public authorities indicates that it wasn't considered particularly useful nor particularly relevant.

4.47 E-learning does provide an effective tool for providing learning to large numbers of people and some public authorities have recognised its potential as a means of delivering training on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. However it is recognised that if a new e-learning package is to be developed it should be based on the revised guidance and provide additional value rather than repeating what is already in the guidance. The revised guidance provides detailed information on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and has proven to be an effective tool for helping public authorities to understand what the Act requires them to do.

Review of the Monitoring and Reporting Arrangements

Monitoring and Reporting Arrangements

4.48 Public authorities indicated that they are satisfied with the monitoring and reporting arrangements put in place by DAERA. The revised guidance provided by DAERA was generally thought to be very helpful while DAERA's early commissioning of annual monitoring returns and the deadline of September for submitting returns have both been welcomed by public authorities.

4.49 However a small number of public authorities reported some difficulties in relation to the monitoring and reporting arrangements. One public authority commented that monitoring and reporting can be complex and difficult to implement and is only as good as the governance systems in place in the organisation while another highlighted the risk that not all RNIA Templates may be included in the annual monitoring return.

4.50 One public authority indicated that the sheer volume of policies that it had to deal with meant that it was impractical to complete a RNIA template in respect of all its policies and therefore it had taken a decision not to complete RNIA Templates in respect of many of its policies that had no rural impact.

4.51 There is still some uncertainty among public authorities around the submission of narrative reports to DAERA as part of the monitoring and reporting arrangements

including what to include in the narrative and whether the narrative is actually published in the annual monitoring report.

4.52 The requirement to publish the same extensive information in a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts as in the annual monitoring report produced by DAERA is viewed by some public authorities as unwelcome bureaucracy. The view was expressed that a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts is generally perceived to be an overview document and may not therefore be particularly suitable for publishing details of every RNIA Template that had been completed by the public authority during the period.

4.53 In terms of how the monitoring and reporting arrangements might be improved it was suggested that the development of an on-line system would assist public authorities with compiling their information. DAERA has developed a 'Rural Needs Database' which aims to assist with the compiling and reporting of information contained in RNIA Templates and is currently piloting this within DAERA. There is therefore merit in making this database available to all public authorities following the successful completion of the pilot to assist them with compiling the information required under the Act and to help ensure more effective reporting.

4.54 Some public authorities suggested that it would also be useful for DAERA to provide feedback to public authorities on the returns they submit for inclusion in the annual monitoring report to help them understand better what information is required and to help ensure that the information submitted is relevant and meaningful to rural stakeholders and other interested parties.

Annual Monitoring Report

4.55 Section 3(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 requires public authorities to compile information on the exercise of their functions under section 1 of the Act and to send this information to DAERA. The 'Template for Information to be Compiled' provided at Appendix 2 of the guidance requires public authorities to include information on their annual monitoring return in respect of each section 1 activity on (a) the rural needs identified (b) the issues they have considered in relation to these rural needs and (c) how the activity had been influenced by these rural needs. This information is then published by DAERA in its annual monitoring report.

- 4.56 The review found a significant increase in the number of section 1 activities reported on by Departments and Councils in respect of the 2nd Annual Monitoring Report over the 1st Annual Monitoring Report and a definitive improvement in the quality of information provided. The evidence shows that all public authorities are now well aware of the need to complete RNIA Templates and to compile information on these and send this information to DAERA.
- 4.57 However there were some issues regarding proportionality in terms of the information submitted in the annual monitoring returns with cases where a large amount of information was provided in relation to a section 1 activity which wasn't particularly relevant. In other cases the information submitted, while factually correct, was not particularly meaningful. There is therefore a need to make public authorities more aware of their audience and to ensure that the information provided is meaningful to rural stakeholders and that it is information which is relevant.
- 4.58 While the rural stakeholder survey showed that the majority of rural stakeholders are not aware of the annual monitoring report, of those that responded regarding the usefulness of the information less than two thirds found the information published in the 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report useful.
- 4.59 There were also a small number of cases where annual monitoring returns were submitted late due to a lack of clarity on who in the public authority was responsible for compiling the information. One public authority suggested that all requests for monitoring information should be sent to a generic email address to help ensure it was acted upon. There is therefore merit in reviewing communication between DAERA and Rural Needs Co-ordinators to ensure that returns are submitted on time.
- 4.60 DAERA has issued *Guidance on completing the Appendix 2 Template* which aims to assist public authorities with completing their annual monitoring returns and help ensure more consistency in the information provided. While public authorities have found this guidance useful there is still some ambiguity around the specifying of the 'policy area'. It is recognised that the *Guidance on completing the Appendix 2 Template* updates the list of policy areas provided in Section 2D of the RNIA Template set out in the guidance and therefore public authorities should adhere to the *Guidance on the completing the Appendix 2 Template* when completing their annual monitoring returns.

- 4.61 There were also some concerns raised about the risk of the amount of information contained in the annual monitoring report becoming too unwieldy in the event of a significant increase in the number of public authorities being added to the schedule as a result of the review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule which DAERA is required to undertake at least every 3 years. It was also noted that in the event of a restoration of the NI Assembly and Executive there was likely to be an increase in the number of activities being reported on by Departments.
- 4.62 There were also some concerns raised about the value that DAERA adds to the process of compiling the annual monitoring report and the timeliness of the information published in the report given that the information published relates to activities which were undertaken up to 21 months prior to the report being published.
- 4.63 It is also recognised that the absence of the NI Assembly and the lack of awareness among rural stakeholders has resulted in less scrutiny of the annual monitoring report than might otherwise be the case and that the level of scrutiny is likely to increase in the future.

Review of Co-operation

Co-operation Events

- 4.64 The review found that the co-operation events hosted by DAERA have been useful to public authorities as they provide an opportunity for rural needs representatives to engage directly with DAERA and to share information and experiences. There is merit in reviewing both the frequency and structure of the events with a view to maximising their benefit to public authorities. There is also an opportunity for DAERA to use these events to promote best practice, to provide feedback on the monitoring and reporting process and to facilitate discussion on the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process and the completion of RNIA Templates.

Section 5

Recommendations in relation to overcoming the barriers to the effective implementation of the due regard duty

Introduction

5.1. This Section sets out the barriers and potential barriers identified together with the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 2 of its Terms of Reference.

To identify any barriers (or potential barriers) to the effective implementation of Section 1(1) of the Act and to make recommendations on how such barriers (or potential barriers) might be overcome.

Identification of Barriers and Potential Barriers

5.2. The Working Group has identified the main barriers to the effective implementation of section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 as follows:

- a. A lack of awareness among some decision makers of the need to comply with the due regard duty in respect of policies, strategies, plans and public services;
- b. A lack of understanding among some decision makers of what a public authority is required to do specifically in order to fulfil the due regard duty in relation to a particular activity;
- c. A lack of access to and/or availability of the statistical and other information necessary to inform decision makers of the social and economic needs of people in rural areas;
- d. Decision makers not undertaking a Rural Needs Impact Assessment or not giving sufficient or timely consideration to the needs of people in rural areas when undertaking a Rural Needs Impact Assessment;
- e. Decision makers treating the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process and the completion of RNIA Templates as a 'tick box' exercise;
- f. 'Rural needs fatigue' due to the absence of a 'screening out' process with the result that decision makers are investing time and resources in completing RNIA Templates in respect of activities which have no impact, no likely impact and no potential to impact on people in rural areas or their social and economic needs.

- g. Insufficient resources made available by some public authorities to support rural needs co-ordinators.

Recommendations

5.3. The review found that there was still 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. The working group recognised that awareness levels varied within public authorities and that more work needs to be done to increase awareness. It was also recognised that both DAERA and public authorities had a role to play in raising awareness and that there was a need to ensure that awareness raising was appropriately targeted within organisations.

Recommendation 1

- **It is recommended that DAERA works in partnership with other public authorities to deliver a programme of ‘on the ground’ and corporate level promotion activities aimed at raising awareness of the due regard duty and of the support and guidance available to decision makers to help them ensure they comply with the due regard duty.**

5.4. The review found that in some cases decision makers did not fully understand the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process and that the completion of the RNIA Template was being treated as a ‘tick box’ exercise. It also found that in some cases the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process set out in the guidance wasn’t being followed and that while some RNIA Templates had been completed to a high standard others were of variable quality.

5.5. The working group recognised the importance of carrying out a proportionate Rural Needs Impact Assessment and recording this in a properly completed RNIA Template to help demonstrate to rural stakeholders the steps which a public authority has taken to comply with the due regard duty. It was agreed that there would be merit in providing further information on the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process and the completion of RNIA Templates on the DAERA website.

Recommendation 2

- **It is recommended that DAERA develops a suite of new online material specifically on the Rural Need Impact Assessment process and the completion of the RNIA Template and makes this available to all public authorities.**
- 5.6. The working group acknowledged the barriers to the effective implementation of the due regard duty which had been identified in the review and recognised that that further training could help address some of the barriers.
- 5.7. It was recognised that it would not be practical or efficient for DAERA to provide classroom based training to all officials involved in section 1 activities but that there would be merit in targeting training at those officials within public authorities who had a promotion, supporting or monitoring role in relation to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within their organisation. This is consistent with DAERA’s policy of “supporting public authorities to support themselves”.
- 5.8. It was agreed that the provision of more intensive training than that which was provided in the awareness training sessions provided to public authorities prior to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 coming into operation should be provided to Rural Needs Co-ordinators (and other officials with a supporting role) to enable them to provide effective support to officials within their organisation.

Recommendation 3

- **It is recommended that DAERA develops comprehensive training on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and makes this available to those officials within public authorities with responsibility for promoting, supporting and monitoring the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 based on need.**
- 5.9. The review found that there was a risk of ‘rural needs fatigue’ resulting from the completion of RNIA Templates in cases where a public authority had a considerable number of internal or technical policies which had no potential to impact on people in rural areas and for which no rural needs could be identified. In such cases the completion of an RNIA Template in respect of all section 1 activities was seen as overly bureaucratic. The working group recognised that the objective of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process was not to create unnecessary bureaucracy but to help public authorities ensure that the needs of people in rural areas were given due regard to. The working group agreed that DAERA should review the guidance to try to address this.

Recommendation 4

- **It is recommended that DAERA reviews the guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 with a view to clarifying that where a public authority is satisfied that a Section 1 activity in which it is engaged has no impact, no likely impact and no potential to impact on people in rural areas or their social and economic needs, that public authority may complete its own condensed version of the RNIA Template to document that information and to confirm that it is satisfied that the due regard duty has been fully considered.**

5.10. The review found that that there was some lack of understanding among decision makers on what a public authority is required to do specifically in order to fulfil the due regard duty in relation to a particular activity. There was also some uncertainty around whether a Rural Needs Impact Assessment was required to be undertaken in certain circumstances.

5.11. The working group recognised that there may therefore be merit in individual public authorities taking steps to increase awareness and understanding of what decision makers are required to do in order to comply with the legislation and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences between decision makers. It was agreed that the workshop model may be the most effective way of doing this.

Recommendation 5

- **It is recommended that public authorities host regular workshops for decision makers within their organisation (subject to need) for the purposes of increasing awareness and understanding of the duties on public authorities under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.**

5.12. The review found that a lack of access to and/or availability of the statistical and other information necessary to inform decision makers of the social and economic needs of people in rural areas was one of the main barriers to the effective implementation of the due regard duty. The working group agreed that there would be merit in more being done to promote awareness of available statistical information and the resources available to obtain information.

5.13. DAERA's rural statistician attended the 3rd meeting of the working group and delivered a presentation on the availability of rural statistics and the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) and on sources which public authorities could use to obtain statistical information. The working group agreed

that there was merit in making rural statistics more accessible to public authorities and in providing available statistical, research and other relevant information on the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website.

Recommendation 6

- It is recommended that DAERA creates a dedicated 'Rural Statistics and Information' page on the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website incorporating appropriate links to statistics, research and other useful information (including links to the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service) and contacts for the DAERA rural statistician and other Departmental statisticians groups.

5.14. The review found that some Rural Needs Co-ordinators were of the opinion that the resources required to undertake their role effectively were not fully recognised by their own public authority and that there could often be competing pressures particularly as their responsibilities in relation to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 were often added on to their existing role. The working group acknowledged that each public authority operated differently and that it was important that sufficient resources were made available to ensure that the legislation was effectively implemented.

Recommendation 7

- It is recommended that public authorities review the resources allocated to supporting the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 with a view to ensuring that rural needs co-ordinators have access to the resources necessary to undertake their role effectively.

Section 6

Recommendations in relation to the measures put in place to support public authorities

Introduction

6.1 This Section sets out the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 3 of its Terms of Reference.

To consider the measures put in place by DAERA to support public authorities in fulfilling the duty under Section 1(1) of the Act (including advice, guidance, information provided on the DAERA website, awareness training, e-learning etc.) and to make recommendations on:

- a. any changes which should be made to current support measures to help public authorities implement the Section 1(1) duty effectively;***
- b. any further support or other measures which should be considered to help public authorities implement the Section 1(1) duty effectively; and***
- c. any further action that public authorities should take themselves to help ensure that the Section 1(1) duty is implemented effectively.***

Recommendations

6.2 The review found that while the information on rural needs provided on the DAERA website was useful to public authorities, there would be merit in reviewing the design and content of the website with a view to presenting the information in a more user-friendly manner. The working group agreed that the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website was an important resource and it would also be useful for DAERA to consider adding further information to assist public authorities in complying with the legislation.

Recommendation 8

- It is recommended that DAERA reviews the structure and content of the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website with a view to making the information more user-friendly and including more information on the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process including, for example, rural statistics, research information, case studies, further guidance and examples of good practice.**

6.3 The working group agreed that there was merit in individual public authorities holding regular workshops to increase awareness and understanding of what decision makers are required to do in order to comply with the legislation and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences between decision makers. It also agreed that there would be merit in DAERA offering to attend these workshops to provide advice and expertise on aspects of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 if requested while recognising the potential resource implications for DAERA.

Recommendation 9

- **It is recommended that DAERA offers to support one half day workshop on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for each public authority annually on request.**

6.4 The working group acknowledged that some public authorities had taken steps to embed the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within their organisation including at corporate and management level. It agreed that there would be merit in similar good practice being implemented across all public authorities.

Recommendation 10

- **It is recommended that public authorities take steps to seek to embed the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 further within their organisation including, for example, by incorporating compliance with the Act in their Assurance Statements, Submission Templates and Audit and Risk Procedures.**

6.5 DAERA's rural statistician gave a presentation to the working group on the availability of rural statistics and on sources which public authorities could use to obtain statistical information. The working group recognised the valuable knowledge and expertise which the rural statistician can contribute to the process of identifying the needs of people in rural areas and agreed that there would be merit in the rural statistician participating in the proposed new Rural Needs Network (*see recommendation 22*).

Recommendation 11

- **It is recommended that the DAERA rural statistician participates in the Rural Needs Network.**

Section 7

Recommendations in relation to research and information gathering

Introduction

7.1 This Section sets out the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 4 of its Terms of Reference.

To consider DAERA's powers in respect of research on matters relating to rural needs under Section 2(b) of the Act and to make recommendations on:

- a. anything regarding future research on matters relating to rural needs which the Working Group considers appropriate;***
- b. how public authorities might gather better information on rural needs; and***
- c. how public authorities might engage more effectively with rural stakeholders in gathering information on rural needs.***

Recommendations

7.2 The working group recognised the value of learning from the experiences of others and agreed that there would be merit 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. It was also suggested that public authorities could benefit from examples of rural success stories in other jurisdictions where rural communities may have faced similar challenges to those in Northern Ireland. The working group recognised the importance of being open to adopting new approaches and developing new solutions to address the challenges facing rural communities and that examples of what worked and what hadn't worked in other jurisdictions could benefit public authorities here.

Recommendation 12

- It is recommended that research is undertaken to identify examples of rural success stories, positive impacts and lessons learned as a result of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 or rural proofing and that DAERA makes these available on the 'Rural Needs' section of its website.**

7.3 The review found that while some public authorities engaged directly with rural stakeholders in seeking to identify the needs of people in rural areas, the results

of the stakeholder survey showed that very few rural stakeholder organisations had been engaged with public authorities in relation to the undertaking of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment. The review also found that obtaining the information on the needs of people in rural areas necessary to inform decision making was a key barrier to implementing the due regard duty effectively.

7.4 The working group recognised the value of public authorities engaging directly with the rural community sector in seeking to understand the needs of people in rural areas. It also recognised that positive relationships between public authorities and rural community organisations would help assist public authorities in gathering information on rural needs and help lead to better outcomes for rural dwellers

Recommendation 13

- **It is recommended that public authorities seek to develop effective relationships with rural community organisations and, where appropriate, to seek to engage with the rural community sector in a meaningful and timely manner as part of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process being undertaken in respect of Section 1 activities.**

7.5 The working group acknowledged that the needs of people in rural areas were often different to those in urban areas and that different approaches or solutions were often required in rural areas to help ensure equitable outcomes for rural dwellers. The working group recognised that there was a need for greater innovation in seeking to address the needs of people in rural areas and that public authorities should be open to adopting new and innovative approaches to help deliver more equitable outcomes for rural dwellers. The working group also recognised the value in engaging widely with rural stakeholders and seeking to ensure that a broad range of views are heard.

Recommendation 14

- **It is recommended that public authorities be open to adopting new and innovative approaches to engaging with the rural community sector when seeking to gather information on rural needs including taking measures to engage with people in rural areas who may not normally participate in public consultations or stakeholder engagement.**

7.6 The review found that a lack of access to and/or availability of statistical and other information necessary to inform decision makers was a barrier to the effective implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. It was acknowledged that there was a significant amount of rural research available through academic and other research organisations but that it was not always easily accessible by public authorities, It was agreed that DAERA could play a role in identifying available rural research and in making it more accessible to public authorities.

Recommendation 15

- **It is recommended that DAERA incorporates a rural research hub webpage on the 'Rural Needs' section of its website providing a dedicated space for links to relevant research relating to the needs of people in rural areas to be shared.**

7.7 It was recognised that AFBI undertakes rural research on behalf of DAERA covering a wide range of rural policy issues and this could be of use to public authorities in seeking to understand the needs of people in rural areas relevant to their activities. The working group agreed that there would be merit in making this research more available to public authorities in a format that was suitable for policy makers.

Recommendation 16

- **It is recommended that the Agri-food and Bio-Sciences Institute (AFBI) produces a short research briefing document (which provides an overview and summary of the research) as an output of all current and future rural research undertaken by it on behalf of DAERA.**

Section 8

Recommendations in relation to the monitoring and reporting arrangements

Introduction

8.1 This Section sets out the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 5 of its Terms of Reference.

To review the monitoring and reporting arrangements established by DAERA in relation to Section 3 of the Act and to make recommendations on:

- a. any changes which should be made to improve the effectiveness of the current monitoring and reporting arrangements;***
- b. any further support which should be provided by DAERA to assist public authorities in fulfilling their monitoring and reporting obligations; and***
- c. how the information provided in the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report might be improved in terms of presentation and/or content.***

Recommendations

8.2 The review found that some public authorities continued to face challenges compiling the information required for the annual monitoring report. The working group acknowledged that 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 a public authority's annual monitoring return.

8.3 DAERA provided the working group with a demonstration of a model which it had developed for the purposes of improving the monitoring of information and ensuring greater accuracy in the information provided on the annual monitoring returns. The model provides for details of all RNIA Templates to be recorded on a 'live' database and therefore provides Rural Needs co-ordinators with an up to date record of all RNIA Templates produced by the public authority at any point in time. DAERA was currently piloting the database within its department with the pilot scheduled to finish in December 2019.

Recommendation 17

- **It is recommended that DAERA shares its ‘Rural Needs Database’ model with other public authorities following the successful completion of the pilot.**
- 8.4 The review found that some public authorities had concerns about whether the information they submitted to DAERA for inclusion in the annual monitoring report was appropriate for the purpose and saw merit in DAERA providing feedback on the monitoring returns which they submitted.
- 8.5 The working group agreed that there was merit in DAERA providing feedback on the annual monitoring returns as this would help public authorities understand better what type of information is appropriate and help ensure that the information submitted in respect of the annual monitoring report is suitable in terms of quality and content and that the information contained in the annual monitoring report is meaningful.

Recommendation 18

- **It is recommended that DAERA offers to provide feedback on the content of annual monitoring returns submitted by public authorities on request.**
- 8.6 The review found that there was a risk of the amount of information contained in the annual monitoring report becoming too unwieldy and that the presentation of the annual monitoring report could be improved. The working group acknowledged that there was also scope to do more to improve the presentation of the annual monitoring report and to make it more meaningful and relevant to rural stakeholders.

Recommendation 19

- **It is recommended that DAERA reviews the structure and content of the annual monitoring report with a view to improving its presentation and making the information more meaningful and relevant to stakeholders including through the use of indexing, the use of narrative rather than tabular format, the use of infographics (where appropriate) and the provision of linkages to RNIA Templates on public authorities’ own websites (where available).**
- 8.7 The working group recognised the value in publishing completed RNIA Templates as a means of informing stakeholders of the steps they had taken to comply with the due regard duty and as a means of ensuring greater transparency on how

rural needs were being given regard to in policy making and public service delivery. It also recognised that stakeholders can face challenges in accessing published RNIA Templates on public authorities' own websites particularly if they were unfamiliar with the layout of the website. The working group agreed that it would be helpful to rural stakeholders if all RNIA Templates published by a public authority were made available on their website in a single place.

Recommendation 20

- **It is recommended that public authorities publish their RNIA Templates on their website on a single webpage and that the Annual Monitoring Report includes a link to each public authority's webpage.**

8.8 The review found that the requirement to publish the same extensive information in a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts and in the annual monitoring report produced by DAERA is viewed as unwelcome bureaucracy. The working group acknowledged a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts was generally perceived to be an overview document and may not therefore be particularly suitable for publishing details of every RNIA Template that had been completed by the public authority during the period. It also acknowledged that it may be more appropriate for the Annual Report and Accounts to contain a summary of the information published in the annual monitoring report but that the current legislation did not provide for that.

Recommendation 21

- **It is recommended that, if a suitable opportunity arises, DAERA should seek to amend Section 3 of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to remove the requirement to publish the same comprehensive information in both a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts and in the annual monitoring report which is required to be published by DAERA.**

Section 9

Recommendations in relation to the co-operation arrangements

Introduction

9.1 This Section sets out the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 6 of its Terms of Reference.

To consider the co-operation arrangements put in place by DAERA under Section 4 of the Act and to make recommendations on how co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities might be improved.

Recommendations

9.2 The working group recognised the value of the co-operation that had taken place between public authorities to date and the merit in Rural Needs Co-ordinators having a network where they could continue to develop relationships and share information and experiences. It was agreed that the annual co-operation events previously hosted by DAERA had been useful but that there was merit in meeting more frequently and for Rural Needs Co-ordinators to have input into the agenda. It was also agreed that there would also be merit in making provision for Rural Needs Co-ordinators to engage informally outside of the formal network meetings on an ongoing basis. The working group agreed that there would be merit in establishing a Rural Needs Network made up of representatives of all public authorities and that this should replace the co-operation events.

Recommendation 22

- **It is recommended that DAERA establishes a Rural Needs Network open to all public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act for the purposes of facilitating co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities (including DAERA), promoting best practice across public authorities and providing a forum for Rural Needs Co-ordinators to raise and discuss issues relating to rural needs, including engagement with the rural community sector.**

Recommendation 23

- **It is recommended that the Rural Needs Network meets formally on a biannual basis and that following its establishment, the network would explore options for networking on an ongoing basis outside of the formal process, including options using technology.**

Section 10

Recommendations in relation to the review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Introduction

10.1. This Section sets out the recommendations made by the Working Group in respect of Objective 7 of its Terms of Reference.

To consider the list of bodies and persons currently listed in the Schedule to the Act and to make recommendations in relation to any bodies or persons which the Working Group thinks should be added to, removed from or modified in the Schedule to the Act (giving reasons for the recommendations) for the purposes of informing the review of the Schedule which is required to be undertaken by DAERA under Section 3(1) of the Act.

Recommendations

10.2. The working group considered the bodies and persons currently listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and agreed that there were no public authorities that should be removed from, or modified in, the Schedule.

10.3. The working group also considered a number of bodies that were not currently listed in the Schedule and agreed only to recommend for consideration bodies where a case had been made for inclusion.

10.4. The working group also agreed that there was a need for DAERA to engage widely when undertaking its review of the list of bodies and persons in the Schedule including with the current members of the Rural Needs Working Group.

Recommendation 24

- **It is recommended that DAERA should consider adding the following organisations to the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 when undertaking its review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule as required under Section 1(3) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016:**

Northern Ireland Water

Northern Ireland Water is a government owned company which provides the water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. The working group has recommended that NI Water be considered for inclusion in the Schedule to the

Act on the basis that people who live in isolated rural areas can often face difficulties in accessing the public water mains network.

Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company

The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company is responsible for the operation of its subsidiary companies, including Ulsterbus, Metro and Northern Ireland Railways, trading jointly as Translink. The working group has recommended that the NITHC be considered for inclusion in the Schedule to the Act on the basis that rural dwellers are less likely to have access to a regular public transport service and that people without access to private transport (e.g. young people, older people, people with disabilities) in rural areas are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of access to services and employment opportunities.

Waterways Ireland*

Waterways Ireland is a North/South implementation body with responsibility for the management, maintenance, development, and restoration of inland navigable waterways primarily for recreational purposes. The working group has recommended that Waterways Ireland be considered for inclusion in the Schedule to the Act on the basis that its remit within Northern Ireland relates primarily to rural areas and the potential impact it has on rural communities and people visiting rural areas for recreational purposes.

** to the extent that it exercises functions in or as regards Northern Ireland*

Recommendation 25

- **It is recommended that DAERA engages with members of the Rural Needs Working Group when undertaking the review of the list of bodies and persons in the Schedule under Section 1(3) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.**

Appendix 1 – List of Recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Public Authority Recommended to Implement
1	It is recommended that DAERA works in partnership with other public authorities to deliver a programme of 'on the ground' and corporate level promotion activities aimed at raising awareness of the due regard duty and of the support and guidance available to decision makers to help them ensure they comply with the due regard duty.	DAERA
2	It is recommended that DAERA develops a suite of new online material specifically on the Rural Need Impact Assessment process and the completion of the RNIA Template and makes this available to all public authorities.	DAERA
3	It is recommended that DAERA develops comprehensive training on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and makes this available to those officials within public authorities with responsibility for promoting, supporting and monitoring the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 based on need.	DAERA
4	It is recommended that DAERA reviews the guidance on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 with a view to clarifying that where a public authority is satisfied that a Section 1 activity in which it is engaged has no impact, no likely impact and no potential to impact on people in rural areas or their social and economic needs, that public authority may complete its own condensed version of the RNIA Template to document that information and to confirm that it is satisfied that the due regard duty has been fully considered.	DAERA
5	It is recommended that public authorities host regular workshops for decision makers within their organisation (subject to need) for the purposes of increasing awareness	All Public Authorities

	and understanding of the duties on public authorities under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.	
6	It is recommended that DAERA creates a dedicated 'Rural Statistics and Information' page on the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website incorporating appropriate links to statistics, research and other useful information (including links to the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service) and contacts for the DAERA rural statistician and other Departmental statisticians groups.	DAERA
7	It is recommended that public authorities review the resources allocated to supporting the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 with a view to ensuring that rural needs co-ordinators have access to the resources necessary to undertake their role effectively.	All Public Authorities
8	It is recommended that DAERA reviews the structure and content of the 'Rural Needs' section of the DAERA website with a view to making the information more user-friendly and including more information on the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process including, for example, rural statistics, research information, case studies, further guidance and examples of good practice.	DAERA
9	It is recommended that DAERA offers to support one half day workshop on the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for each public authority annually on request.	DAERA
10	It is recommended that public authorities take steps to seek to embed the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 further within their organisation including, for example, by incorporating compliance with the Act in their Assurance Statements, Submission Templates and Audit and Risk Procedures.	All Public Authorities
11	It is recommended that the DAERA rural statistician participates in the Rural Needs Network.	DAERA

12	It is recommended that research is undertaken to identify examples of rural success stories, positive impacts and lessons learned as a result of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 or rural proofing and that DAERA makes these available on the 'Rural Needs' section of its website.	DAERA
13	It is recommended that public authorities seek to develop effective relationships with rural community organisations and, where appropriate, to seek to engage with the rural community sector in a meaningful and timely manner as part of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process being undertaken in respect of Section 1 activities.	All Public Authorities
14	It is recommended that public authorities be open to adopting new and innovative approaches to engaging with the rural community sector when seeking to gather information on rural needs including taking measures to engage with people in rural areas who may not normally participate in public consultations or stakeholder engagement.	All Public Authorities
15	It is recommended that DAERA incorporates a rural research hub webpage on the 'Rural Needs' section of its website providing a dedicated space for links to relevant research relating to the needs of people in rural areas to be shared.	DAERA
16	It is recommended that the Agri-food and Bio-Sciences Institute (AFBI) produces a short research briefing document (which provides an overview and summary of the research) as an output of all current and future rural research undertaken by it on behalf of DAERA.	AFBI
17	It is recommended that DAERA shares its 'Rural Needs Database' model with other public authorities following the successful completion of the pilot.	DAERA

18	It is recommended that DAERA offers to provide feedback on the content of annual monitoring returns submitted by public authorities on request.	DAERA
19	It is recommended that DAERA reviews the structure and content of the annual monitoring report with a view to improving its presentation and making the information more meaningful and relevant to stakeholders including through the use of indexing, the use of narrative rather than tabular format, the use of infographics (where appropriate) and the provision of linkages to RNIA Templates on public authorities' own websites (where available).	DAERA
20	It is recommended that public authorities publish their RNIA Templates on their website on a single webpage and that the annual monitoring report includes a link to each public authority's webpage.	All Public Authorities
21	It is recommended that, if a suitable opportunity arises, DAERA should seek to amend Section 3 of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to remove the requirement to publish the same comprehensive information in both a public authority's Annual Report and Accounts <u>and</u> in the annual monitoring report which is required to be published by DAERA.	DAERA
22	It is recommended that DAERA establishes a Rural Needs Network open to all public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act for the purposes of facilitating co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities (including DAERA), promoting best practice across public authorities and providing a forum for Rural Needs Co-ordinators to raise and discuss issues relating to rural needs, including engagement with the rural community sector.	DAERA
23	It is recommended that the Rural Needs Network meets formally on a biannual basis and that following its establishment, the network would explore options for networking on an ongoing basis outside of the formal process, including options using technology.	DAERA

24	<p>It is recommended that DAERA should consider adding the following organisations to the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 when undertaking its review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule as required under Section 1(3) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Northern Ireland Water - The Northern Ireland Transport Company - Waterways Ireland 	DAERA
25	<p>It is recommended that DAERA engages with members of the Rural Needs Working Group when undertaking the review of the list of bodies and persons in the Schedule under Section 1(3) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.</p>	DAERA

Appendix 2 – Terms of Reference (Objectives)

- I. To review the implementation of Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 by departments, local councils and other public authorities to date.
- II. To identify any barriers (or potential barriers) to the effective implementation of Section 1(1) of the Act and to make recommendations on how such barriers (or potential barriers) might be overcome.
- III. To consider the measures put in place by DAERA to support public authorities in fulfilling the duty under Section 1(1) of the Act (including advice, guidance, information provided on the DAERA website, awareness training, e-learning etc.) and to make recommendations on:
 - a. any changes which should be made to current support measures to help public authorities implement the Section 1(1) duty effectively.
 - b. any further support or other measures which should be considered to help public authorities implement the Section 1(1) duty effectively.
 - c. any further action that public authorities should take themselves to help ensure that the Section 1(1) duty is implemented effectively.
- IV. To consider DAERA's powers in respect of research on matters relating to rural needs under Section 2(b) of the Act and to make recommendations on:
 - a. anything regarding future research on matters relating to rural needs which the Working Group considers appropriate;
 - b. how public authorities might gather better information on rural needs;
 - c. how public authorities might engage more effectively with rural stakeholders in gathering information on rural needs.
- V. To review the monitoring and reporting arrangements established by DAERA in relation to Section 3 of the Act and to make recommendations on:
 - a. any changes which should be made to improve the effectiveness of the current monitoring and reporting arrangements;
 - b. any further support which should be provided by DAERA to assist public authorities in fulfilling their monitoring and reporting obligations
 - c. how the information provided in the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report might be improved in terms of presentation and/or content.
- VI. To consider the co-operation arrangements put in place by DAERA under Section 4 of the Act and to make recommendations on how co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities might be improved.
- VII. To consider the list of bodies and persons currently listed in the Schedule to the Act and to make recommendations in relation to any bodies or persons which the Working Group thinks should be added to, removed from or modified in the Schedule to the Act (giving reasons for the recommendations) for the purposes of informing the review of the Schedule which is required to be undertaken by DAERA under Section 3(1) of the Act.

Appendix 3 – Questionnaires

**REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE RURAL NEEDS ACT (NI) 2016
Questionnaire for Public Authorities**

TYPE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY

1. Please indicate the category of your organisation under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016?

Northern Ireland Department District Council Other Public Authority listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

AWARENESS

2. What is your assessment of the level of awareness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within your organisation?

High		Medium		Low		Don't Know	
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3. Do you think that more needs to be done to increase awareness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016?

Yes No

4. What is your assessment of the level of awareness of the Guidance - 'A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised)' - within your organisation?

High		Medium		Low		Don't Know	
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5. Please provide any suggestions you may have for increasing awareness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 within public authorities.

COMPLIANCE

6. Please provide details of any additional action taken by your organisation to help ensure that the due regard duty under section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is fully complied with (e.g. training, awareness raising, provision of support etc.).

7. What do you see as the main barriers to public authorities complying fully with the due regard duty under Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016?

RURAL NEEDS IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8. Please provide details of any difficulties which officials in your organisation have encountered in undertaking a Rural Needs Impact Assessment as recommended in Chapter 5 of the Guidance - *A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised)*.

9. Please provide details of any difficulties which officials in your organisation have encountered in completing the Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template (*Appendix 1 of the Guidance*).

MONITORING AND REPORTING

10. How satisfied are you with the monitoring and reporting arrangements in relation to the compiling of information, the sending of that information to DAERA and the publication of that information in the Annual Monitoring Report as required under Section 3 of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016?

Very Satisfied Satisfied Not very satisfied Not at all satisfied

11. Please provide details of any issues you have encountered in relation to the monitoring and reporting arrangements that have caused difficulty for you or your organisation.

12. Please provide details of any changes you would like to see made to the monitoring and reporting arrangements to help improve the effectiveness of them.

CO-OPERATION

13. Which of the following DAERA co-operation events have you attended?

February 2018 March 2019 Neither

14. How useful did you find the co-operation event(s)?

Very Useful Useful Not very useful

15. Please provide any suggestions on how you think the co-operation events could be made more beneficial to you or your organisation.

SUPPORT

16. What is your assessment of the support provided by DAERA to date in relation to the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 in respect of the following?

The Official Guidance (A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised))

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

The Guidance on Completing the Appendix 2 Template

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

The Awareness Training provided to your organisation by the Rural Development Council in 2017/18

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

General Advice and Support provided by DAERA in response to requests from your organisation

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

Information provided on the Rural Needs section of the DAERA website

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

The e-learning package on rural needs that was available via CAL and the Rural Development Council

Very Useful Useful Not very useful Don't know

17. Please provide any comments which you think would be helpful in relation to any of the above.

18. Please provide details of any further support which you think is necessary to help public authorities fully comply with the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

**REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE RURAL NEEDS ACT (NI) 2016
Questionnaire for Rural Stakeholders**

1. How aware are you of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Very Aware

Aware

Not Aware

2. What difference do you think the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 has made in relation to how public authorities have regard to the needs of people in rural areas in respect of any policies, strategies, plans or public services that you are aware of?

A positive difference

No difference

Don't Know

3. How familiar are you with the Rural Needs Impact Assessment Template which public authorities are recommended to complete in respect of their policies, strategies, plans and public services

Very Familiar

Familiar

Not Familiar

4. How would you rate the level of information provided in completed Rural Needs Impact Assessment Templates that you have had sight of?

Very Good

Good

Satisfactory

Unsatisfactory

Variable

Don't Know / Not Applicable

5. Have you been directly engaged with any public authority in relation to the undertaking of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in respect of any policy, strategy, plan or public service?

Yes

No

Don't Know

6. Are you aware of the 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report which DAERA published on its website in December 2018?

Yes

No

7. How useful is the information provided in the 1st Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report which DAERA published on its website in December 2018?

Very Useful

Useful

Not Very Useful

Don't Know

Appendix 4 – Glossary of Terms

The Act	The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016
Annual Monitoring Report	The annual report required to be published by DAERA under section 3(2) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016
AFBI	The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
DAERA	The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
The Guidance / The Revised Guidance	A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised)
NI	Northern Ireland
NINIS	The Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service
NITHC	The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company
Other Public Authority	Any body or person listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 other than a Northern Ireland Department or District Council
Public Authority	Any body or person listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016
Rural Needs Co-ordinator	A person or persons in a public authority with responsibility for liaising with DAERA on the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016
RNIA Template	Rural Needs Impact Assessment Template
Section 1 Activity	The development, adoption, implementation or revision of a policy, strategy or plan or the design or delivery of a public service
The Schedule	The schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Appendix B

(DRAFT) Action Plan of Mid Ulster DC on Implementing the Rural Needs Review Recommendations

	Recommendation: DAERA Review	Current Position: Mid Ulster Council	Proposed Action: Mid Ulster Council
1	Public authorities host regular workshops for decision makers within their organisation (subject to need) for the purposes of increasing awareness All Public Authorities and understanding of the duties on public authorities under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.	Representatives from Mid Ulster District Council currently attend all workshops provided by DAERA that relate to the implementation of Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.	Mid Ulster District Council will host and attend workshops as required with a view to increasing awareness of the requirements of the legislation.
2	Public authorities review the resources allocated to supporting the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 with a view to ensuring that rural needs coordinators have access to the resources necessary to undertake their role effectively.	Resource currently in place to provide advice and guidance in relation to the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. Member and officer training in addition to what was offered by DAERA has also been provided since 2016.	Current allocated resources to be reviewed to identify any gaps and/or additional requirements.
3	Public authorities take steps to seek to embed the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 further within their organisation including, for example, by incorporating compliance with the Act in their Assurance Statements, Submission	Rural Needs Impact Assessments (RNIAs) compliance currently embedded in committee report templates.	Review and work towards ensuring compliance by embedding within Council Assurance Statement processes, to include Audit and Risk Procedures.

	Templates and Audit and Risk Procedures.		
4	Public authorities seek to develop effective relationships with rural community organisations and, where appropriate, to seek to engage with the rural community sector in a meaningful and timely manner as part of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process being undertaken in respect of Section 1 activities.	Council currently liaises with Rural Community Network and the Rural Development Council (until it ceased operations).	Council will seek inclusion in any already formed constituted group/s which represents rural communities in the Mid Ulster District. If this is not possible/practical, Council can explore the establishment of a Rural Needs Reference Group with a membership base of constituted groups, representative of rural needs in the Mid Ulster District.
5	Public authorities be open to adopting new and innovative approaches to engaging with the rural community sector when seeking to gather information on rural needs including taking measures to engage with people in rural areas who may not normally participate in public consultations or stakeholder engagement.	Council currently liaises with Rural Community Network and the Rural Development Council (until it ceased operations).	Council will seek inclusion in any already formed constituted group/s which represents rural communities in the Mid Ulster District. If this is not possible/practical, Council will explore the establishment of a Rural Needs Reference Group with a membership base of constituted groups representative of rural needs in the Mid Ulster District.
6	Public authorities publish their RNIA Templates on their website on a single webpage and that the annual monitoring report includes a link to each public authority's webpage.	There currently is a Rural Needs section on Council's website which explains the legislation and provides contact detail for the relevant Council Officer.	The relevant section of the Council website will be updated to include the Rural Needs Impact Assessments (RNIA) template and annual monitoring reports at https://www.midulstercouncil.org/your-council/rural-needs