

Rural Policy Framework for NI

Summary of Consultation Findings



Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

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Summary of Consultation Findings

The following is a brief overview of the consultation findings and how proposals are likely to proceed. The Department plans to implement all of the consultation proposals.

Question 1: Do you agree that the proposed overarching aim ‘To create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active’ for the Rural Policy Framework is appropriate?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents

**Response rate:
96 (91%)**

Yes: 72 (75%)

No: 24 (25%)

Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents suggested amendments to the overarching aim, that there was a need for a definition of sustainable rural community and that environmentalism should be included as a separate and distinct point.
- Need for rural communities that older, younger and disabled people will want to stay in.
- Need for affordable housing in rural areas.
- Rural inequalities - Section 75 duties need to be fully considered.
- Need for partnership working.

Departmental response

It is recommended that the overarching aim is amended to: ***‘To create a rural community where people want to live, work and be active in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way.’***

This helps to reflect the importance of environmental issues to rural society and that environmental sustainability plays an important part in the schemes that will be developed to support the implementation of the Rural Policy Framework.

The need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

The need for partnership working was reiterated as an issue across many of the proposals. The development of the Framework has been underpinned by engagement, partnership and flexibility throughout with extensive engagement incorporating a wide range of rural stakeholders. Many of the issues identified throughout the stakeholder engagement process will require inter-departmental co-operation and joint working to ensure strategic delivery in addressing those issues and the Department is committed to this approach. The establishment of the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee and its sub-committees will ensure that there is a formal mechanism in place to support this collaborative approach with key stakeholders and delivery partners in the design, development and delivery of future programmes.

To ensure full and robust consideration of Section 75 issues going forward, the Department intends to establish a Section 75 / equality sub-group to regularly feed views into the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee. This will ensure that views from members with specific Section 75 responsibilities are taken into account in relation to the new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. All sub-groups will be expected to meet in advance of the main oversight committee meetings and will be tasked with reporting progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Question 2: Do you agree that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) approach should continue under the wider umbrella of the Rural Policy Framework?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 92 (88%)	Yes: 90 (98%)	No: 2 (2%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- Importance noted of local decision making and capacity building through grassroots structures such as Rural Support Networks. These interconnected structures were able to respond quickly to local needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Need to align to the NI Anti-poverty strategy and to explicitly identify rural poverty interventions within the Thematic Pillars. There were issues raised around poverty such as fuel and food poverty. It was noted that COVID has exacerbated poverty, social isolation and loneliness. The groups identified as being at particular risk of vulnerability and poverty are single parents the working poor; families with dependents with health disabilities and older people. Need noted for targeted interventions to also address pockets of severe deprivation.
- No equivalent of the Urban Neighbourhood Renewal Programme for the rural areas, which provides dedicated human resources to work in urban neighbourhoods.
- The benefits of the collaborative approach of TRPSI, particularly during COVID-19 were highlighted and a number of respondents noted that this approach should continue.
- Concerns raised about the level of bureaucracy in relation to relatively small levels of grant funding.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation. The Department is fully committed to continuing the TRPSI Programme and ensuring that it complements and supports delivery of Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing of the Rural Policy Framework.

The Department will ensure that the Rural Policy Framework and in particular, Thematic Pillar 3, is consistent with the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy. This will include where appropriate, aligning the Framework with the aims of the Anti-Poverty Strategy to ensure a joined up approach.

The need for partnership working has been reiterated as an issue across many of the proposals. The development of the Framework has been underpinned by engagement,

Departmental response

partnership and flexibility throughout with extensive engagement incorporating a wide range of rural stakeholders. Many of the issues identified throughout the stakeholder engagement process will require inter-departmental co-operation and joint working to ensure strategic delivery in addressing those issues and the Department is committed to this approach. The establishment of the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee and its sub-committees will ensure that there is a formal mechanism in place to support this collaborative approach with key stakeholders and delivery partners in the design, development and delivery of future programmes.

In relation to levels of bureaucracy, the Department will complete a full evaluation and review of existing programmes to ensure that lessons learned and best practice will be incorporated into the design, development and delivery of new schemes. As part of this process DAERA will ensure that any future Programme development will have streamlined controls and governance arrangements and these will be proportionate and appropriate.

To test a number of assumptions including the administrative burden on applicants, delivery agents and the Department, several pilot schemes have been implemented using revised procedures and processes. Pilots to date have included:

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

These pilots will be subject to evaluation and reported on in due course with lessons learned incorporated into the new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. Evaluations will also be carried out in relation to the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programmes with any lessons learned from these also incorporated into the new programme.

Question 3: In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years? Please select what you feel are the top five challenges from the options outlined below.

- Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services)
- Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups
- Broadband/mobile phone connectivity
- Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas)
- Climate change and environmental sustainability
- Future of farming/agri-food sector
- Jobs and business
- Managing tourism in a sustainable way
- Transport and infrastructure

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents

**Response rate:
93 (89%)**

Key themes raised by respondents

Top Challenge Ranked as No.1 Facing Rural Communities

- Availability of appropriate & adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups - 22 (26%)
- Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services) - 19 (22%)
- Climate change and environmental sustainability - 13 (15%)
- Jobs and business - 10 (12%)
- Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas) - 7 (8%)
- Broadband/mobile phone connectivity - 6 (7%)
- Future of farming/agri-food sector - 6 (7%)
- Transport and infrastructure - 2 (2%)
- Managing tourism in a sustainable way - 1 (1%)

Top 5 Challenges Facing Rural Communities

- Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services) - 74 (80%)
- Broadband/mobile phone connectivity - 66 (71%)
- Jobs and business - 54 (58%)
- Climate change and environmental sustainability - 52 (56%)

Key themes raised by respondents

- Availability of appropriate & adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups - 50 (54%)
- Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas) - 46 (50%)
- Transport and infrastructure - 46 (50%)
- Future of farming/agri-food sector - 41 (44%)
- Managing tourism in a sustainable way - 25 (27%)

Key themes

- A number of respondents noted that it was difficult to rank challenges and that they were interconnected and all important. It was noted that rural economies are much more likely to thrive where there are strong communities and a high quality environment.
- The need for revitalisation of rural towns and villages was raised. Suggested a place-based and holistic approach is needed, particularly with changing settlement patterns and COVID-19.
- Key challenges identified for rural areas included: access to broadband (noted that this also needs addressed from a digital inclusion perspective); community development human resources; and joint strategy for youth provision; need for affordable housing in rural areas; rural planning issues.
- Planning issues raised as a blockage in progressing developments in rural areas.
- Climate change generally raised as a major challenge and linkages to for example, the need to retrofit properties to help make them more energy efficient.
- A number of respondents noted that two challenges going forward for rural NI are COVID-19 and Brexit.
- A number of respondents noted the need for outdoor recreation space.
- Need for access to health services and food poverty was raised as a challenge.
- A commitment to capacity building, a recognition that groups are cyclical in nature and investment in skills development in the sector are essential to underpin successful delivery.
- Recognition of the need for a joined-up approach by Government.

Departmental response

The Department recognises that the challenges listed are interrelated and that it can be difficult to rank these as the evidence shows that these are issues which need to be addressed across rural communities in Northern Ireland. However, as previously noted the Department will focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of available resources to address challenges going forward. The Department needs to ensure that it maximises the outcomes delivered to rural areas through the new programme and as part of its role as rural champion.

Departmental response

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many challenges facing rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Many of the themes raised by respondents have already been identified within the Framework, however, the need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other departments and agencies. Similarly, the overarching aim of the Framework will place greater emphasis on the environment thus bringing climate change to the fore.

The Department recognises the need for revitalisation of rural towns and villages which is identified as a priority area of intervention within Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing.

We will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments, agencies and delivery partners.

Question 4: In your opinion, what are the main opportunities facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years? Please select what you feel are the top five opportunities from the options outlined below.

- Diversification within farming/agri-food sector
- Economic development of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging)
- Enabling communities (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers, enhancing community amenities)
- Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs)
- Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland
- Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g. Broadband and emerging technologies) (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs)
- Revitalisation of towns and villages
- Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy)
- Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism
- Transport infrastructure and services

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents

**Response rate:
93 (89%)**

Key themes raised by respondents

Top Opportunity Ranked as No.1 Facing Rural Communities

- Enabling communities (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers, enhancing community amenities) - 23 (27%)
- Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland - 20 (24%)
- Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy) - 11 (13%)
- Diversification within farming/agri-food sector - 6 (7%)
- Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs) - 6 (7%)
- Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism - 5 (6%)
- Economic development of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging) - 4 (5%)
- Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g. Broadband and emerging technologies) (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs) - 4 (5%)

Key themes raised by respondents

- Revitalisation of towns and villages - 4 (5%)
- Transport infrastructure and services - 3 (3%)

Top 5 Opportunities Facing Rural Communities

- Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g. Broadband and emerging technologies) (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs) - 67 (72%)
- Enabling communities (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers, enhancing community amenities) - 61 (66%)
- Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland - 60 (65%)
- Diversification within farming/agri-food sector - 50 (54%)
- Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy) - 43 (46%)
- Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs) - 41 (44%)
- Revitalisation of towns and villages - 38 (41%)
- Transport infrastructure and services - 35 (38%)
- Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism - 32 (34%)
- Economic development of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging) - 27 (29%)

Key themes

- A number of respondents noted that it was difficult to rank opportunities and that they were interconnected and all important.
- The need for revitalisation of rural towns and villages was raised.
- In relation to sustainable development and climate adaptation, a number of respondents noted there were opportunities going forward.
- An issue which is not listed is housing and having houses provided within rural communities is an important issue in ensuring sustainability of rural communities.
- Health and wellbeing through enhanced participation in physical activity in the outdoors is another key opportunity.
- Recognition of the need for a joined-up approach by Government.

Departmental response

The Department recognises that the opportunities listed are interrelated and that it can be difficult to rank these. However, as previously noted the Department will focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of available resources to maximise opportunities going forward. The Department needs to ensure that it maximises the outcomes delivered to rural areas through the new programme and as part of its role as rural champion.

Departmental response

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

The Department recognises the need for revitalisation of rural towns and villages which is identified as a priority area of intervention within Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing. We will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

The Department also recognises the important role that climate change will play going forward. The overarching aim of the Framework will place greater emphasis on the environment thus bringing climate change to the fore.

The Department also recognises that in rural areas that a lot of the issues raised will be addressed through a joined-up government approach.

**Question 5a: Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship: To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.
Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?**

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 91 (87%)	Yes: 89 (98%)	No: 2 (2%)
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Question 5b: Do you agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- Develop a culture of rural innovation
- Raise awareness, build capacity and capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation
- Invest in and develop our rural economy

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 90 (86%)	Yes: 88 (98%)	No: 2 (2%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted that rural communities tend to be endemically innovative, therefore the support for innovation was crucial, rather than the need to foster innovation in the first place. It was suggested that the first priority intervention should be amended to 'support and foster the rural culture of innovation'.
- Lessons need to be learned from previous schemes. It was noted that there is too much bureaucracy and the government needs to be less risk adverse. Local authorities also wanted further engagement with DAERA during the programming phase with any support programme offering both grants and capacity building.
- A number of respondents noted a need to invest in green infrastructure with direct linkages between the economy and the natural environment. Also suggested that more action should be taken to promote the business benefits of environment management.
- Again, a need for affordable and social housing in rural areas was cited. A number of respondents suggested support for owners of derelict buildings in villages and towns.
- A number of respondents noted that rural businesses need sustained and developed, not just start-up businesses.
- A need to support female entrepreneurship was identified by a number of respondents.
- Access to decent broadband and mobile infrastructure is one of the key foundations, particularly with a culture now of working from home and digital hubs. There is an opportunity for rural communities to benefit economically from remote working environments.
- Thematic Pillar 1 should not be considered in isolation from the other pillars and interventions need to be flexible in order to be successful. Also consideration to adding Programme for Government outcomes 2 and 6 to this Thematic Pillar.

Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted a need for upskilling rural communities, whether that be through linkages with education providers; encouraging trade skills etc.
- Planning policies and their impact on businesses in rural areas should be addressed.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation. However, given that some respondents suggested that rural businesses are already innovative and need to be sustained and developed going forward, consideration will be given to enhancing the first priority intervention to: 'To support and foster the rural culture of innovation'. Consideration will also be given to whether or not it is appropriate to add Programme for Government outcomes 2 (We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment) and 6 (We have more people working in better jobs) to this Thematic Pillar.

Many of the themes raised by respondents have already been identified within the Framework, however, the need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies. Similarly, the overarching aim of the Framework will place greater emphasis on the environment thus bringing climate change to the fore.

As previously noted the Department will continue to focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of any resources to address challenges and maximise opportunities going forward.

The Department recognises the impact of planning policies on businesses in rural areas and will seek to champion rural in this regard by ensuring partnership working with the relevant Departments and agencies. It should be noted that DAERA is not solely responsible for rural issues. The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 provides a statutory duty on the public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. This could involve: acting as Rural Champion; working with other Departments and public agencies on an integrated approach; and supporting rural groups and networks to articulate rural needs to policy makers and influencers.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the

Departmental response

Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Question 6a: Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism: To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.

Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 92 (88%)	Yes: 77 (84%)	No: 15 (16%)
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Question 6b: Do you agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- Encourage and support the delivery of compelling year-round, authentic visitor products and experiences of a quality that will provide international stand out for Northern Ireland
- Support a rural tourism sector that is commercially focused and achieves sustainable levels of growth and prosperity
- Facilitate welcoming and supportive rural communities to play an enhanced role in developing and managing tourism in their locality, thereby strengthening, benefitting and enriching local areas
- Recognise, value, protect and enhance Northern Ireland's natural, cultural and historic built environment as the cornerstone of its rural tourism

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 89 (85%)	Yes: 70 (79%)	No: 19 (21%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted that to be sustainable, there is a need to disperse visitors to rural locations from the main destinations of North Coast and Belfast. Also there needs to be a focus on rural employment.
- A number of respondents noted responding to climate change must be at the heart of any sustainable tourism proposals and that there was not enough reference to this. Concerns were raised about climate change and the consequences of international long haul flights. Suggestion was also made for the need for a green recovery fund.
- Sustainable tourism can be achieved through clear set of boundaries to prevent extractive tourism and attractions should be dispersed with a focus on green outcomes. A need was identified for enhanced visitor management services and initiatives such as Tidy Towns to deal with issues such as litter, fires, dog attacks on stock etc.

Key themes raised by respondents

- Sustainable tourism needs adequate infrastructure. There is a need to invest in physical infrastructure such as roads, car parks, public transport etc. as tourists have difficulty getting to rural areas. There is also a need for effective broadband/mobile phone connectivity to enable the promotion/marketing and booking of tourism services.
- A number of respondents noted that derelict buildings should be brought back into use and that the current planning regulations made it difficult and many were buying second homes in tourist areas and so outpricing locals.
- Domestic tourism is more likely post COVID-19 for a period of time with increased staycations and it is the overnight stays that benefits rural areas the most. There is a need for authentic, year round products/experiences given the seasonal nature of tourism.
- Issues were raised in relation to public rights of way, particularly for landowners with trespassing on private land.
- A number of respondents noted a need to avoid duplication at a programming stage.
- In order to support rural tourism, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the physical regeneration of towns and villages as these can be unattractive and subject to anti-social behaviour.
- Collaborative and partnership working is very much needed.
- In relation to branding/marketing, a number of respondents noted that 'Embrace a Giant Spirit' should be used; there was a need for authentic tourism, local branding; clustering of tourism attractions; and involvement of locals in the promotion of their area/culture.
- There is a need to build capacity of rural communities to establish, sustain and grow rural businesses.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation.

The overarching aim of the Framework will place greater emphasis on the environment thus bringing climate change to the fore.

As previously noted the Department will continue to focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of any resources to address challenges and maximise opportunities going forward. There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business

Departmental response

and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

The Department recognises the need for physical regeneration of towns and villages and is engaging fully with the High Street Task Force to ensure that there is a rural dimension to the recovery of Northern Ireland's high streets. In addition this is identified in Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing.

The Department also recognises the issues around extractive tourism and the dispersion of attractions and will seek to take forward work on this.

**Question 7a: Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing: To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.
Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?**

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 93 (89%)	Yes: 92 (99%)	No: 1 (1%)
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Question 7b: Do you agree that the five priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- Champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness
- Support a rural dimension within the work of other organisations which are promoting positive health and wellbeing, addressing social exclusion, isolation and loneliness and build the capacity of rural organisations and people to develop their activities in this area
- Establish effective approaches to reducing loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of social isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers
- Sustain the future viability of villages as social and economic centres
- Support the strategic development of existing rural community assets as places where people can meet, interact, access services and enhance their health and wellbeing

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 89 (85%)	Yes: 84 (94%)	No: 5 (6%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents suggested the need to include recognition of specific impacts crime has on people in rural areas including domestic and sexual violence and suggested a priority area for intervention relating to this could be added.
- A number of respondents noted that the mental health crisis has worsened through COVID-19, particularly with a strain on counselling services with lengthy waiting lists.
- A number of respondents noted that the future viability of villages as social and economic centres should be sustained. It was noted that DAERA should explore how the need for additional social housing in rural settlements can be met in partnership with DfC, the Housing Executive and Housing Associations.
- The impact of COVID-19 and EU Exit has created pressures which have increased food costs and reduced food availability, compounding food poverty. It was noted that there is a need for safe and affordable food and that agriculture; food production; and health policies

Key themes raised by respondents

should complement each other more closely. Also a reference to food innovation whilst ensuring ongoing environmental sustainability was also made. Reference was also made to plant based alternatives and nature friendly meat products.

- A number of respondents noted that LGBT+ support organisations were mainly based in urban areas and that there was a need for adequate resourcing in rural areas with those in the LGBT+ community more likely to experience social isolation than the population as a whole, particularly since the pandemic.
- Isolation and loneliness is a major health challenge in rural areas all age groups, although particularly prevalent in ageing populations. There is a need to rebuild social engagement in rural communities, particularly since COVID-19. A targeted programme of support could make full use of physical assets such as rural halls. Libraries also provide social spaces for people from all demographic groups to engage with each other.
- Particularly since COVID-19, the need and demand for outdoor recreational space has increased. Associated infrastructure needs to be accommodated in a sustainable way. There is a need for walking trails and footpaths and that outdoor space which increase physical health, support mental wellbeing and improve quality of life. Reference was also made to initiatives such as farmer to farmer networks and group tidy ups such as Tidy Towns which would encourage the local community to take an interest in their local environment and build capacity to provide benefits for climate, nature and people whilst improving health and wellbeing.
- There is a need for collaborative and joined up working between statutory, community and voluntary sectors including on a cross-border basis with DAERA having a critical rural champion role to play. A number of respondents noted that COVID-19 highlighted how poor and limited many statutory sector rural supports, services and networks are and that many people's health and wellbeing was only sustained on the back of huge voluntary community efforts.
- A number of respondents noted a need for capital funding for health and wellbeing projects being taken forward by community planning statutory partners. It was noted that community groups and rural networks need more support and long-term funding. A number of respondents commended the recent rural halls refurbishment pilot scheme and would like to see this rolled out. It was noted that DAERA needs to link into other funding opportunities such as PEACE+ to address the priority areas of intervention.
- A number of respondents noted that they had expected to see some reference to poverty as the key determinant of ill health and to ensure that programmes of support will address rural poverty. Interventions should also have synergy with strategies under development by DfC. When targeting interventions, it was noted that consideration should be given to poverty, disability and service coverage.

Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted a concern that health services were becoming more centralised and chronic waiting lists were making it harder to access for vulnerable rural dwellers. Whilst the use of telemedicine has a place to improve access for some, it was noted that it is not a 'one size fits all' approach and that physically accessible GP services were still required in rural areas. It was noted that some services might need decentralised. The benefits of social prescribing were also noted.
- A number of respondents noted a need for community buildings and hubs with integrated coffee shops or social supermarkets to remove the stigma of other activities on offer. There is also an increasing need for rural community transport provision, however funding has decreased so the role of DAERA to champion rural in this regard was highlighted.
- A number of respondents noted a need for community development led interventions and the need to complement the community planning process. It was noted that capacity and skills development were as important as capital grants and Area-based strategy managers would be welcomed as they would be best placed to champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness.
- Difficulties with work/life balance for farmers were noted and the uncertainty in relation to the future. It was noted that increased levels of mental health interventions may be needed for farm families.
- A number of respondents noted that this should be a central hub for other themes and not standalone. Rural wellbeing should be the overarching goal that the Framework delivers on.
- A number of respondents suggested amending the 4th priority area for intervention to 'sustain the future viability of villages as residential, social and economic centres'.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation. Respondents ranked this pillar most highly and highlighted its importance. The Department accepts that the importance of health and wellbeing has become even more acute since the pandemic, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Some respondents also suggested the need for priority areas of intervention recognising rural crime and poverty. The Department will take this feedback into account where appropriate when finalising the Framework.

A number of respondents have mentioned various groups within Section 75 equality legislation and their needs, the Department would reiterate that equality was a horizontal principle carried across all the Thematic Pillars of the Framework. Going forward, all schemes being developed will be subject to equality screening. The Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Departmental response

Many of the themes raised by respondents have already been identified within the Framework, however, the need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

The TRPSI approach has been highly effective over the years in responding quickly to emerging needs and facilitating the targeting of funding where it is needed the most. This was particularly so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. As previously noted the Department will continue to focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of any resources to address challenges and maximise opportunities going forward in the development of the Rural Business Community Investment Programme. The Department also recognises the massive contribution of voluntary and community efforts in maintaining people's health and wellbeing, particularly throughout COVID-19. In the development of any new programme, the Department will consider is there a merit in developing cross-border solutions on the basis of evidence.

Many of the priorities will be funded and taken forward through a range of different mechanisms. The Department continues to link into all potential funding streams including PEACE+ / Shared Prosperity Funding/TRPSI funding etc.

The Department has noted feedback that area-based strategy managers would be welcomed and that the rural halls refurbishment pilot scheme should be rolled out and that there is a need for walking trails, footpaths and outdoor space.

Question 8a: Thematic Pillar 4: Employment: To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.

Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 4: Employment is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 93 (89%)	Yes: 90 (97%)	No: 3 (3%)
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Question 8b: Do you agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 4: Employment are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- To promote rural prosperity by providing support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability and growth;
- To champion the need to address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers
- To invest in and develop our rural society

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 75 (71%)	Yes: 75 (100%)	No: 0 (0%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted a need for better, wider range of housing products. Household needs change over time and working from home can only be facilitated if there is affordable housing available. Planning permission remains a challenge but do planners understand the nature of the projects in front of them?
- A number of respondents noted a need for measures to be in place to address personal and practical issues that create barriers to employment such as affordable childcare; transport and broadband issues.
- Many young people are emigrating from rural areas to access training or work - there is a need to keep them in the rural areas, particularly with an ageing population. Furthermore, some areas were heavily reliant on migrant workers and now have a declining population importance of a differentiated and more flexible migration policy.
- Local employment is critical to rural communities, not just new employment opportunities but sustaining existing employment in these areas.
- A number of respondents noted that skills deficits can be a consequence of poor terms and conditions synonymous with particular industries such as caring professions and hospitality with long working hours and low pay. There is a need to work with colleges and provide linkages to employers with skills shortages. It was also noted that the costs to train employees in a conventional way are very high - suggestion to look at virtual or simulation training for trades.
- Libraries can provide access to information and enhance people's quality of life e.g. job seeking information.

Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted that there should be linkages to DfE 'A Skills Strategy for NI - Skills for a 10x Economy'.
- A number of respondents noted that councils were best placed to lead on these priority areas for intervention given that they have statutory responsibility for enterprise, community planning function and are establishing labour market partnerships for their areas.
- Programmes need to be developed in ways that complement and support the Green Growth Strategy as it emerges and for future grant schemes, it was noted that sustaining jobs was as important as job creation.
- A number of respondents noted that Pillars 1 and 4 were very similar and consideration could be given to merging the two.
- A number of respondents noted the need for green jobs, possibly via a green jobs scheme, however, others had concerns that this would result in machinery replacing jobs.
- A number of respondents noted that interventions 1 and 2 were too broad and asked how they could be measured.
- The need for collaborative working was highlighted, particularly between Councils, education providers and employers.
- A number of respondents noted that there was a need for support to non-farming enterprises and allowing farm diversification.
- Given that women are more likely to have caring responsibilities and experience a lower employment rate due to these responsibilities, it was noted that there is a need for affordable and accessible childcare in rural areas.
- A number of respondents also noted the need for rural hubs which provide remote working facilities and shared creativity options.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation.

Some respondents indicated that the priority areas for intervention were too broad and that consideration could also be given to merging Thematic Pillars 1 and 4. However, the Department is of the view that whilst there are similarities across these pillars, there is merit in keeping them separate and that the broader nature of the interventions facilitate a greater scope for interventions on the ground. The Department will also review the DfE 'A Skills Strategy for NI - Skills for a 10x Economy' and include references to this in the revised Framework if appropriate.

Many of the themes raised by respondents have already been identified within the Framework, however, the need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with

Departmental response

other Departments and agencies. It is hoped that such work will help address the emigration of young people from rural areas.

The Department also notes that respondents have indicated a need for affordable and accessible childcare in rural areas and the need for any future schemes to also complement the Green Growth Strategy as it emerges.

As previously noted the Department will continue to focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of any resources to address challenges and maximise opportunities going forward. There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Question 9a: Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity: To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.

Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 91 (87%)	Yes: 90 (99%)	No: 1 (1%)
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Question 9b: Do you agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- To support sustainable public transport services between rural areas and urban centres and encourage active and public transport usage that better meets the needs of rural dwellers
- To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres
- To support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live
- To reduce barriers to accessing services in rural areas

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 87 (83%)	Yes: 87 (100%)	No: 0 (0%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted that good internet access is essential for rural households and businesses alike and that the pandemic has amplified the digital divide between urban and rural (particularly notable during home schooling and also for victims of crime who had to access online support services). It was noted that some rural areas are not covered by project stratum and do not have broadband access with a need for DAERA to work with other Departments to resolve this. The working from home culture provides an opportunity for rural areas to catch up with urban and there is an opportunity to capitalise on digital technologies. It was suggested that digital innovation hubs could facilitate the provision of these services and that there was a need to develop programmes such as the 'Go ON NI' scheme to improve the IT maturity of users. Further action is also needed on mobile phone coverage.
- A number of respondents noted that affordable and fit for purpose access to public transport in rural areas is important (e.g. many people go to urban areas from rural areas to access services such as doctors; childcare; work; main shop for the week etc. and women are more likely than men to rely on public transport). A number of respondents also noted the need for more greenways, cycle lanes and rural trails and that public transport in rural areas was limited and not fit for purpose with many rural routes having been cut back and economically unviable.

Key themes raised by respondents

- Need for DAERA to collaborate with DfE, DfI and NI Water and other large energy users to reduce energy demand and use land for renewable energy generation. It was noted that there were also better opportunities for geographically targeted connectivity with the water and hills, particularly in coastal areas and that greater disabled access was needed for harbours and coastal walkways etc. The development of rural infrastructure is required but must be done in a way that protects and conserves natural environment and rural communities.
- With increased demand for working from home, it was noted that remote rural areas could ease housing pressures in traditional commuter zones and that as rural communities continue to grow, there is a need for more services to meet that demand.
- Need for more electric recharge points for cars in rural areas. Also a number of respondents noted that clean technology should be a key focus. Rural consumers should be provided with correct information, advice and support to enable them to make the transition to net zero.
- It was noted that services have reduced in rural areas over the years such as access to bank buildings; GPs; post offices; libraries etc. and that this has resulted in increased social isolation.
- A number of respondents noted that connectivity was required for on farm data collection (i.e. technology to monitor livestock and crops). The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that some jobs can be carried out remotely and a number of respondents noted that employers should be encouraged to keep these options available.
- A number of respondents noted that there was a need to define 'sustainable' and that the priorities should be more specific as 'to support' was a very general term. Balanced regional development needs to be targeted, planned and delivered. Also, a number of respondents suggested localised needs could be included in the first intervention.
- The need for collaborative working was noted.
- There is a concern that if emergency services are needed, it takes much longer to reach rural areas.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation.

Some respondents suggested that reference also needs included to localised needs within rural areas for the first priority area for intervention, however, the Department considers that this has already been covered within the priority areas for interventions. It was also noted that the priority areas for intervention were very general with the term 'to support'. The Department considers that the phrase 'to support' covers a wide variety of mechanisms to address need.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business

Departmental response

and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Many of the themes raised by respondents have already been identified within the Framework. As previously noted the Department will continue to focus on partnership working with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the most efficient and effective targeting of any resources to address challenges and maximise opportunities going forward. In particular, the Department will continue to work with key stakeholders to maximise broadband coverage by project stratum in rural areas and recognises the importance of this to facilitating access to digital technologies. The Department will also continue to work with other stakeholders to develop digital inclusion and transformation programmes.

Question 10: What are your views on how the five thematic pillars should be prioritised, ranked by priority from 1-5 (with 1 being the highest priority and 5 being the lowest priority)?

- Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship
- Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism
- Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing
- Thematic Pillar 4: Employment
- Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents

**Response rate:
93 (89%)**

Key themes raised by respondents

Top Thematic Pillar as No.1

- Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing - 52 (56%)
- Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship - 15 (16%)
- Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity - 14 (15%)
- Thematic Pillar 4: Employment - 10 (11%)
- Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism - 2 (2%)

Top 3 Thematic Pillars

- Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing - 84 (90%)
- Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity - 65 (70%)
- Thematic Pillar 4: Employment - 63 (68%)
- Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship - 54 (58%)
- Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism - 12 (13%)

Departmental response

It is clear from respondents ranking the Thematic Pillars that Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing was prioritised. This is not surprising given that we are still in the midst of a global pandemic and the outworkings of that. The Department recognises the integrated nature across all pillars.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight

Departmental response

Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Question 11: Do you agree that the 14 Key Principles outlined below are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- Address the needs of rural communities through the delivery of outcomes based initiatives which provide value for money and also contribute to the outcomes set out in the draft Programme for Government 2016-21 (PfG);
- Promote the piloting of new and innovative approaches to the challenges facing rural communities;
- Encourage partnership working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector;
- Recognise the important role played by the rural community sector and the need to encourage rural community empowerment;
- Encourage the mainstreaming of successful projects and the development of suitable exit strategies;
- Complement other rural initiatives including the Rural Needs Act 2016;
- Be cognisant of the fact that all Departments have responsibilities for rural areas;
- Promote sustainability through support for projects which deliver long term benefits for rural communities;
- Seek to promote equality and good relations in line with the Department's duties under Section 75;
- Seek to complement the aims and objectives of other key Executive policies and strategies including the Draft PfG and the New Decade, New Approach Deal;
- Promote the sharing of information (in line with UK data protection legislation), learning and best practice between organisations;
- Seek to complement the community planning process;
- Recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis; and
- The Framework will seek to use the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (TRPSI) delivery approach under the wider umbrella of Thematic Pillar 3.

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 92 (88%)	Yes: 76 (83%)	No: 16 (17%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- The need for a key principle or possibly a thematic pillar relating to environmental sustainability, protecting biodiversity and addressing climate change.

Key themes raised by respondents

- Partnership working with other regions - how will such cooperation be developed?
- A number of respondents suggested a need for stronger reference to community planning and were concerned at removal of LAG approach.
- Queries raised as to how a new programme will be resourced and monitored.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation.

The Department is of the view that by expanding the overarching aim (see Question 1) within the Framework to include a reference to the Environment that this will address any concerns in relation to environment and sustainability.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. Part of the role of the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee will be to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the programme; making recommendations for changes as necessary; and manage expectations for rural stakeholders around funding and what we can deliver. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

Question 12: Are there any other aspects of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 90 (86%)	Yes: 61 (68%)	No: 29 (32%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted that any future programme must take into account lessons learned from the current Rural Development Programme through LAGs.
- A number of respondents noted that there was no section on the importance of the natural environment as a theme and that there was a need for more focus on sustainability and green economy, ultimately aiming towards net zero.
- A number of respondents noted that the provision of social and affordable housing in rural communities was a big issue pre-pandemic and has become even more of an issue now that house prices are rising and more people seeking to return to rural communities, particularly with working from home. A number of respondents noted that the issue should be added as a separate pillar as housing is the cornerstone of building strong communities.
- A number of respondents welcomed how the Framework had been developed through engagement and an element of co-design.
- A number of respondents were concerned about the loss of EU funding and where funding for a replacement programme would come from. It was noted some funding would be available from the Community Renewal Fund but the status of Shared Prosperity Funding is unclear. Concerns were also raised that the COVID-19 has had an adverse impact on incomes in rural communities. It was also noted that the Framework was developed pre-COVID so there is a good opportunity to ensure any solutions match current needs.
- It was noted that DAERA should take into account inequalities in updating the Audit of Inequalities report and associated action plan. A number of respondents also suggested there was a need for an EQIA and noted that MDM indices favour urban and semi-urban areas.
- There was support for the area based strategy manager approach, however, a number of respondents noted a need for long-term funding, appropriate staffing, administrative budget and resources to support the initiative. It was also noted that a commitment to capacity building would require a recognition that groups are cyclical in nature and investment in skills development in the sector are essential to underpin successful delivery.
- A number of respondents noted that rural schools form a key part of rural communities. It was noted that there are some issues with the availability of EA funded nursery places (i.e. funding same number of places in a year which does not allow flexibility from one year to the next). Working from home could also result in an increased demand for nursery places in rural areas. It was noted that the focus of the Framework was very much on entrepreneurship, the economy and sustainable tourism, rather than the provision of services that will enable a rural population to stay and thrive within the area. The Framework should demonstrate greater focus and attention on the provision of services (health, education, social services).

Key themes raised by respondents

- A number of respondents noted a need for reliable broadband to help rural dwellers working from home. Future agile working and office hubs would help reduce excessive commuting. It was noted that 15 minute neighbourhoods where residents have access to most, if not all of their needs within a short journey from their home could be developed. Concerns were raised about the new proposed DfI funding methodology for distributing Rural Transport Fund monies to the respective Rural Community Transport Partnerships and that this would have a disproportionate population bias in favour of more densely populated and larger rural areas. The championing role of DAERA was welcomed.
- Concerns were raised that the Department would focus only on pillars with the most 'ranking points'. The links between the pillars highlight the need to take a holistic approach in developing and implementing the Framework would be useful to identify options that could efficiently address more than one pillar.
- It was noted that there needed to be a greater focus on older people in the Framework.
- It was noted that links with the farming sector need to be clearer.

Departmental response

This proposal will proceed as per the consultation.

The Department is of the view that by expanding the overarching aim (see Question 1) within the Framework to include a reference to the Environment that this will address any concerns in relation to environment and sustainability.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. Part of the role of the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee will be to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the programme; making recommendations for changes as necessary; and manage expectations for rural stakeholders around funding and what we can deliver. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

The Department appreciates the time taken by respondents and is content to reinforce the importance of the environment and sustainability.

In addition, the Department accepts the vital role that affordable and social housing plays within our rural communities. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the

Departmental response

Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

The Department is also aware of the importance of funding and the need to programme multi-year funding going forward.

In relation to concerns about a focus on the most prioritised pillars, the Department will take a holistic approach in developing and implementing interventions under the five pillars and will take into account views raised by the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee.

Question 13a: Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DAERA in relation to Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland in respect of: The Equality and Human Rights Screening Template

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 93 (89%)	Yes: 42 (45%)	No: 51 (55%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- Need to reflect a range of rural inequalities such as: populations experiencing deprivation; violence against women; housing; equality needs of older and disabled persons;
- Consideration of positive impacts on good relations;
- Need for a full EQIA to be carried out for the Rural Business and Community Investment Programme and also ongoing equality monitoring required.

Departmental response

The Department has noted the comments raised and will carry out equality screening exercises in relation to each of the schemes developed under a future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme and these screening exercises will determine whether or not a full EQIA is required.

There will be lessons to learn from the current LEADER, Rural Tourism and TRPSI programmes in addition to the pilot schemes and it is clear that there is strong support for the bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme. Although there are many opportunities for rural communities, it is clear that going forward, partnership working with a range of rural stakeholders is essential to ensure that any future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme targets funding to where it is needed most at the right time. To this end, the Department intends to establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to help ensure the best possible outcomes when designing the future Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. It is anticipated that this Committee will be established in early 2022. In addition to the central oversight committee, the Department intends to establish a number of sub-groups (including environment / sustainability; Section 75 / equality; and in relation to the thematic pillars) which will regularly report progress and issues to the oversight committee.

The need for affordable and social housing in rural areas has been raised as an issue across many of the proposals and the Department will seek to incorporate this as a need within the Framework. Going forward, we recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department. However, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.

Question 13b: Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DAERA in relation to Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland in respect of: The Rural Needs Impact Assessment

Support for proposal amongst consultation respondents	Response rate: 91 (87%)	Yes: 24 (26%)	No: 67 (74%)
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Key themes raised by respondents

- The Framework should be prioritised across every relevant government department.

Departmental response

The Department has noted the comments raised. It should be noted that DAERA is not solely responsible for rural issues. The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (The Act) provides a statutory duty on the public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. Due regard could include: acting as a rural champion; working with other Departments and other public agencies on an integrated approach; and supporting rural groups and networks to articulate rural needs to policy makers and influencers.

The Act was introduced to ensure that consideration of the needs of people in rural areas becomes more firmly embedded within public authorities and provides a key policy tool for DAERA in seeking to ensure that the needs of people in rural areas are fully considered by government in policy making and in the delivery of public services. It is imperative that Departments, councils and other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act work more closely with rural stakeholders in seeking to identify the particular needs of people in rural areas and to be open to adopting new approaches and to developing more innovative solutions to help address rural needs and deliver more equitable outcomes for rural dwellers.

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