

# Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland



Abridged Version  
March 2022

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

This document is also available on the DAERA website at:

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

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## Contents

Ministerial Foreword . . . . .	4
Introduction . . . . .	6
Purpose of this Document . . . . .	7
Key Statistical Rural Issues Findings - NI Region . . . . .	8
Stakeholder Engagement . . . . .	10
The Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland . . . . .	11
Next Steps . . . . .	21

## Ministerial Foreword



I am delighted to present Northern Ireland's Rural Policy Framework which seeks to support a fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life and opportunities as everyone else in Northern Ireland. The aim is to create a rural community where people want to live, work and be active in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way. This Framework demonstrates DAERA's ongoing commitment to ensuring that our rural communities continue to flourish and support the wider economic drivers to help Northern Ireland prosper.

This Framework has been developed in partnership with a wide range of stakeholder organisations in the context of formulating a policy response to the cessation of the NI Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020, identifying rural needs and opportunities for rural communities going forward. As a rural dweller myself I am very aware of the challenges facing our rural communities, in particular poor access to public transport, utilities and infrastructure, all of acting as barriers to growth. I am also greatly encouraged by the ingenuity, resilience and drive of rural people. My priority is to introduce policies and systems to address these issues; improve linkages; provide greater accessibility to jobs, healthcare, broadband, education and training, social and other opportunities to help sustain and improve the economic outputs and sustainability of rural areas.

We must now look to a post Covid-19 future and embrace the opportunities that green growth, globalisation and technological innovation present. Given the challenges presented by climate change, a focus on the environment and sustainability will be key in the delivery of future programmes. As we in Northern Ireland seek to address these challenges through our Green Growth Strategy, we must lay the foundations for a more sustainable society and our rural communities will play a significant role. If we get it right the benefits to our rural economy will be substantial.

LEADER and our involvement in the Rural Development Programme have clearly demonstrated the benefits of collaboration and a bottom up approach to tackling challenges faced in rural communities. During this time the contribution of Local Action Groups has been invaluable and I want to make sure that we learn from this approach to support the delivery of programmes and schemes going forward. To this end, my Department will establish a Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee (RSOC) to ensure the continued involvement of key stakeholders and rural communities in helping to design programmes that meet these challenges head on. It is my

intention that this Committee will be established in early 2022 and will be supported by a range of sub-committees covering equality, the environment and the thematic pillars of the Rural Policy Framework.

As Rural Champion, DAERA fully appreciates the importance of working in partnership with other public bodies, the private sector and rural stakeholders to ensure the best outcomes for our rural communities. We will therefore work closely with our partners in government to champion the needs of rural communities across a range of issues and this includes issues such as housing and other public services.

DAERA will also continue to deliver the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme and will seek to secure additional funding for rural communities through PEACE PLUS, Green Growth and other future funding opportunities that emerge.

The pilots emanating from the Framework undertaken by the Department will be subject to a full and detailed evaluation, helping to shape our response and development of the new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme will now commence. Of course the wide range of challenges facing rural society are not for DAERA alone to address. We will work in partnership with other Government Departments, Statutory Bodies, Councils and the private and community and voluntary sectors to ensure that they continue to focus on addressing the needs of rural dwellers and businesses.

Rural communities in Northern Ireland are innovative and resilient and I have no doubt that with the right support and by working in partnership with other public authorities and our stakeholders, we will showcase the diverse and innovative way in which the needs of rural communities can be delivered. I am confident that the Rural Policy Framework will help to deliver the best possible outcomes for our rural communities and address many of the challenges that they face, now and long into the future.



Edwin Poots MLA  
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

## Introduction

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has a vision for sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone. Around 670,000 people, i.e. over a third (36%) of the population live in rural areas in Northern Ireland (NI). The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 provides a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to rural needs which should deliver better outcomes for people in rural areas and help make rural communities more sustainable. The impact of a policy or the delivery of a public service can be different for people in rural areas to those in urban areas and a one size fits all approach may not always be appropriate.

Development work on the Rural Policy Framework for NI including extensive stakeholder engagement commenced prior to COVID-19, however, we have since taken into account feedback received throughout the pandemic including outcomes from a number of pilot schemes we launched. Whilst we are still in the midst of the worst global health pandemic in 100 years, there have been a number of emerging positives. It is clear that there is a renewed appreciation for access to nature, Green Growth, and sustainability in a post COVID-19 world. It has been reaffirmed to us that partnership working, not just across central government but also including local government, the private sector and the community and voluntary sector is fundamental to fostering sustainability within rural communities and ensuring the best possible outcomes for people in rural areas. The pandemic required quick and decisive responses to emerging need in rural areas, which would not have been possible without partnership working across all sectors. We have experienced a true willingness to work in new and innovative ways and will continue to nurture this going forward.

Funding via the Priority 6<sup>1</sup> (LEADER and Rural Tourism) of the European Union (EU) approved Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 (hereinafter Priority 6) is coming to an end. Priority 6 has provided around £80 million over the course of its lifetime attributed to non-agricultural activities supporting wider rural development. This includes ongoing work that currently supports rural businesses, rural tourism, basic services in rural areas, rural broadband and village renewal. It is clear that new opportunities now exist to proactively respond to rural needs in a flexible way going forward. The need for a highly flexible yet responsive approach has been magnified further with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Priority 6 (promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas) includes LEADER and Rural Tourism aspects of the EU approved Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and any subsequent EU Common Agricultural Policy development post 2020.

A Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland provides rural communities an opportunity to review its approach to rural policy and what is needed to support rural communities within the context of the following main strategic drivers:

- The impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, in particular the need for flexibility to respond quickly to emerging needs;
- Green Growth including the need for access to nature whilst ensuring sustainability in a post COVID-19 era;
- Opportunities for new ways of working and funding post priority 6 funding under EU Rural Development Programme;
- The priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government (PfG); and
- The New Decade, New Approach Deal.

The Rural Policy Framework for NI is ambitious in regards to both its scope and remit, recognising rural areas as places of opportunity. The Framework sets a challenging vision and aim for rural NI, complementing the Green Growth Strategy, focusing on sustainability. The Framework has also taken into account City and Regional Growth Deals. Whilst a living document, in so far as possible, consideration has been given to current emerging needs impacting on rural areas, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Our rural areas and rural communities make an important contribution to the social and economic life of the region and it is important that governments, rural communities and the voluntary and community sector continue to work together to help sustain rural communities; support balanced regional growth; and to help tackle rural disadvantage.

## Purpose of this Document

This document is an abridged version of the Rural Policy Framework for NI. Detailed information including the evidence and need identified that led to the development of thematic pillars and priority interventions can be found at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development>

## Key Statistical Rural Issues Findings - NI Region

Around 670,000 people (36%) of the NI population live in a rural area, and although their circumstances are in many ways very similar to those of urban dwellers, there are also distinct urban/rural differences which tend to be more pronounced in rural areas outside of Belfast. Rural industry and employment differ in nature from that of towns and cities, and difficulties with accessibility and connectivity, social and digital are almost uniquely rural. The cost of living tends to be higher in rural than urban areas and rural households are more likely to experience fuel poverty. Nevertheless, the rural population on average enjoy a better quality of life than their urban counterparts, in terms of health, happiness and life satisfaction. Figure 1 provides a brief overview of the key issues affecting both urban and rural areas and the differences between the two.

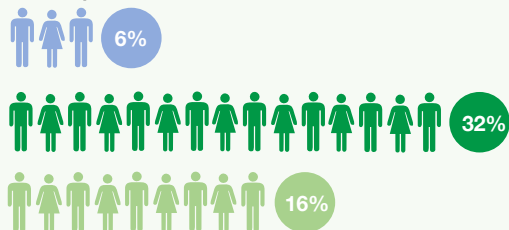




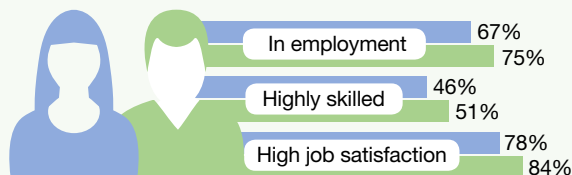
# Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Statistics

● = Urban   ● = Mixed   ● = Rural

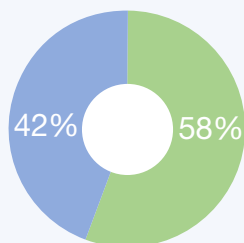
## Population Growth, 2001-2018



## Job Quality 2018



## Businesses 2019



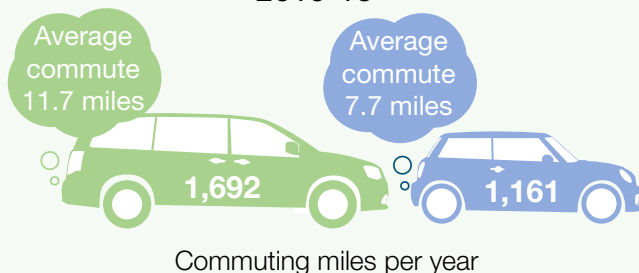
## Tourism Expenditure 2018



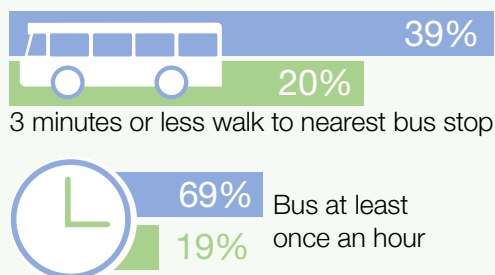
## Median Annual Salary 2019



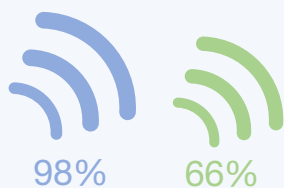
## 2016-18



## Public Transport 2016-18



## Coverage of Superfast Broadband 2019



## People in Absolute Poverty 2018/19

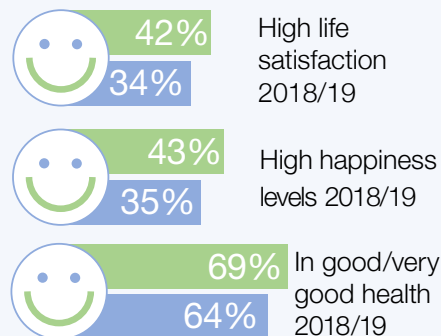
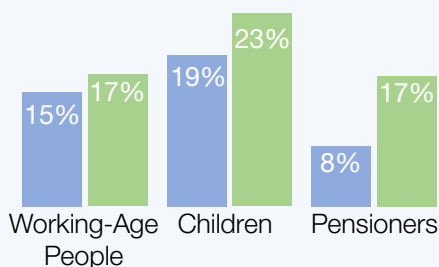


Figure 1: Taken from Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2020 report available at: [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic\\_0.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic_0.pdf)

## Stakeholder Engagement

The Rural Policy Framework for NI has been underpinned by engagement, partnership and flexibility throughout its development with extensive engagement incorporating a wide range of rural stakeholders. Many of the issues identified will require inter-departmental co-operation and joint working to ensure strategic delivery in addressing those issues. The Framework has also adhered to the cross-cutting horizontal principles of sustainability, equality and equal opportunities.

Figure 2 below provides a brief summary of the stakeholder engagement on the Rural Policy Framework for NI.

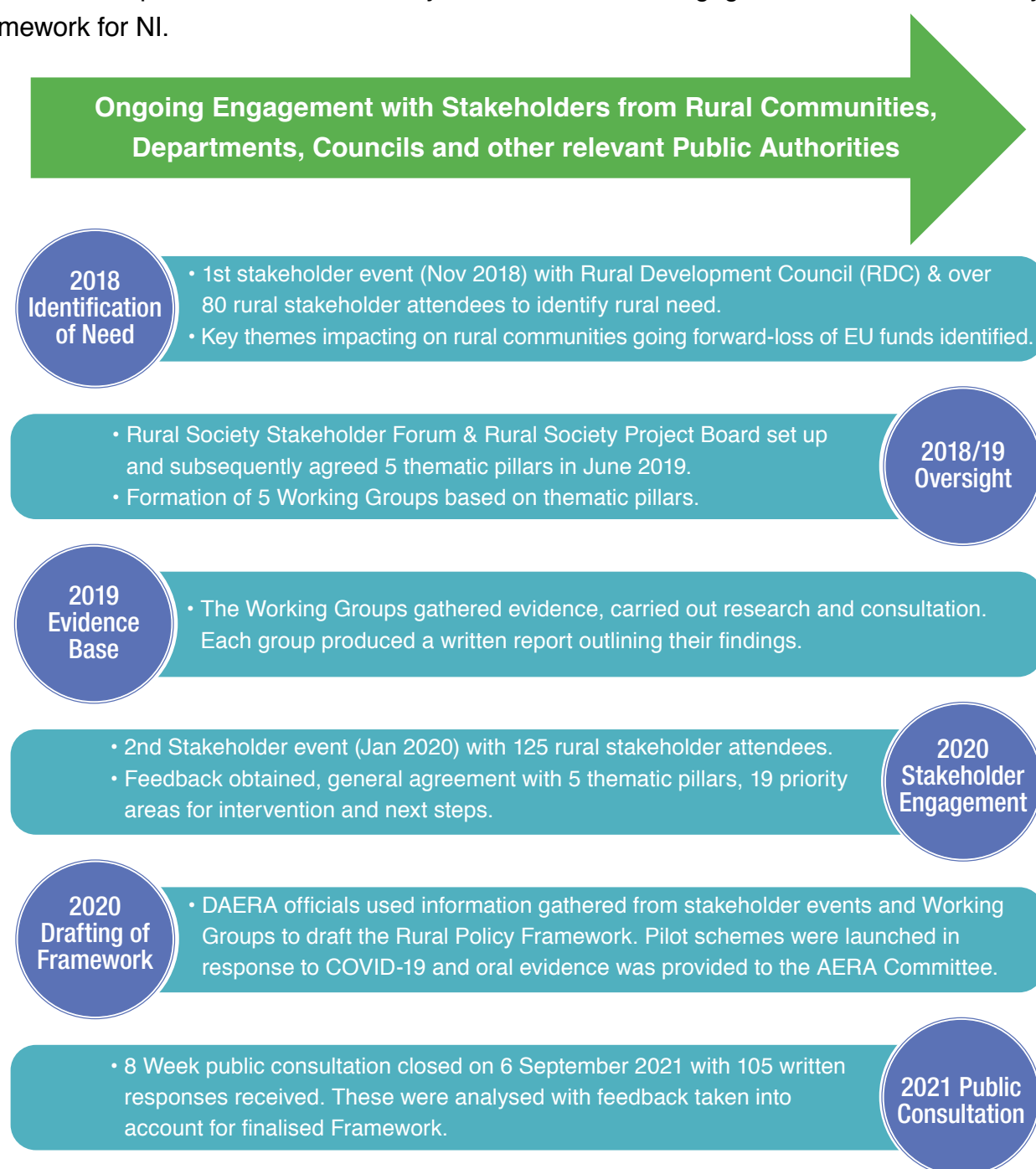


Figure 2: Summary of Stakeholder Engagement.

# The Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland

## Framework Overview

Figure 3 below demonstrates how each of the thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention feed into the overarching Rural Policy Framework for NI. Individual schemes will be developed into a new Programme entitled the 'Rural Business and Community Investment Programme'.

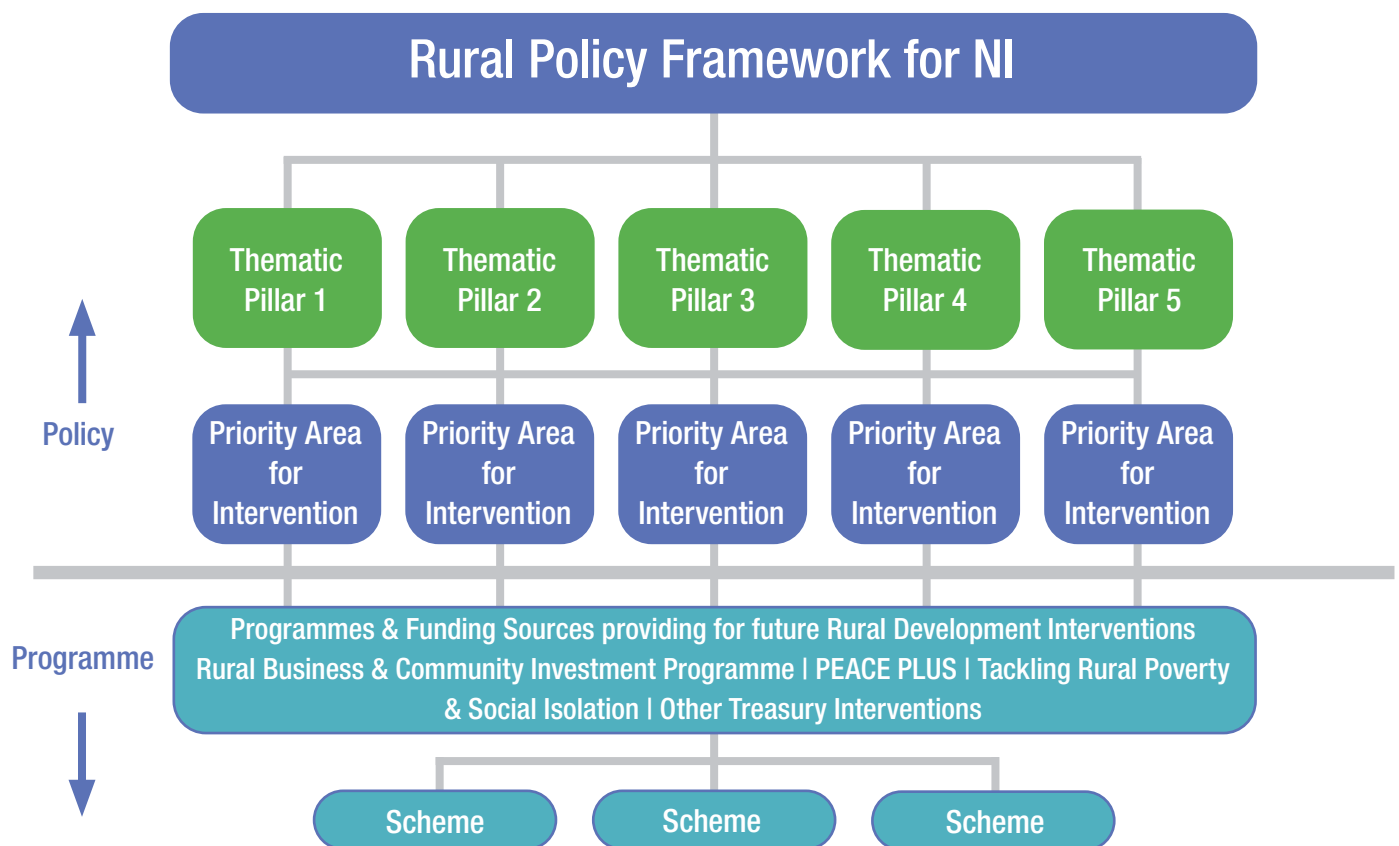


Figure 3: Overview of Rural Policy Framework for NI.

## A Vision for Rural

DAERA's vision is:

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

## Overarching Aim

The aim for the Rural Policy Framework for NI is:

**To create a rural community where people want to live, work and be active in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way.**

## Thematic Pillars and Priority Interventions

The table below provides a summary of the five key thematic pillars and the nineteen associated priority interventions that make up the Rural Policy Framework for NI. Whilst each of the five thematic pillars will incorporate a number of priority areas for intervention, it is recognised that there is potential for significant overlap between the five thematic pillars and that individual priority areas may address more than one thematic pillar.

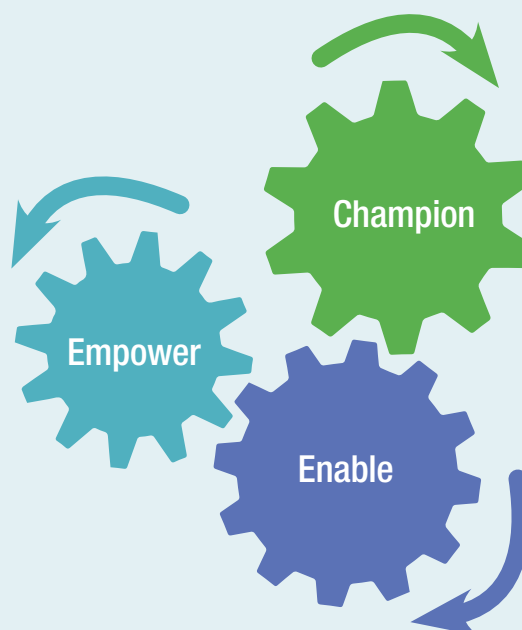
### Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship

To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.



#### Programme for Government Outcomes

- **Outcome 1:** We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.
- **Outcome 2:** We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.
- **Outcome 5:** We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.
- **Outcome 6:** We have more people working in better jobs.



The following priority interventions have been developed for rural innovation and entrepreneurship in NI:

- Intervention 1 - **Champion:** Support and foster the rural culture of innovation.
- Intervention 2 - **Empower:** Raise awareness, build capacity and capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Intervention 3 - **Enable:** Invest in and develop our rural economy.

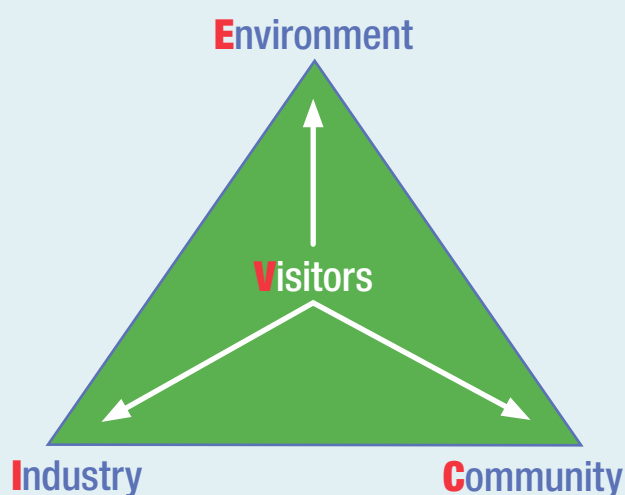
## Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism

To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.



### Programme for Government Outcomes

- **Outcome 1:** We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.
- **Outcome 2:** We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.
- **Outcome 10:** We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.



Adapted from New Zealand Ministry of Tourism *et al.* (2006).

The following priority interventions have been developed for sustainable rural tourism in NI:

- Intervention 1 - **Visitor:** Encourage and support the delivery of compelling year-round, authentic visitor products and experiences of a quality that will provide international stand out for NI.
- Intervention 2 - **Industry:** Support a rural tourism sector that is commercially focused and achieves sustainable levels of growth and prosperity.
- Intervention 3 - **Community:** 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.
- Intervention 4 - **Environment:** Recognise, value, protect and enhance Northern Ireland's natural, cultural and historic built environment as the cornerstone of its rural tourism.

### 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.



#### Programme for Government Outcomes

- **Outcome 3:** We have a more equal society.
- **Outcome 4:** We enjoy long, healthy, active lives.
- **Outcome 5:** We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.
- **Outcome 8:** We care for others and we help those in need.
- **Outcome 9:** We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity.
- **Outcome 11:** We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.
- **Outcome 12:** We give our children and young people the best start in life.



The following priority interventions have been developed for rural health and social wellbeing in NI:

- Intervention 1 - **Champion:** Champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness.
- Intervention 2 - **Build Capacity:** 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.
- Intervention 3 - **Reduce:** Establish effective approaches to reducing loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of social isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.
- Intervention 4 - **Sustain:** Sustain the future viability of villages as residential, social and economic centres.
- Intervention 5 - **Community Assets:** Support the strategic development of existing rural community assets as places where people can meet, interact, access services and enhance their health and wellbeing.

## Thematic Pillar 4: Employment

To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.



### Programme for Government Outcomes

- **Outcome 1:** We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.
- **Outcome 2:** We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.
- **Outcome 3:** We have a more equal society.
- **Outcome 6:** We have more people working in better jobs.
- **Outcome 12:** We give our children and young people the best start in life.



The following priority interventions have been developed for rural employment in NI:

- Intervention 1 - **Support:** To promote rural prosperity by providing support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability and growth.
- Intervention 2 - **Champion:** To champion the need to address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers.
- Intervention 3 - **Invest:** To invest in and develop our rural society.

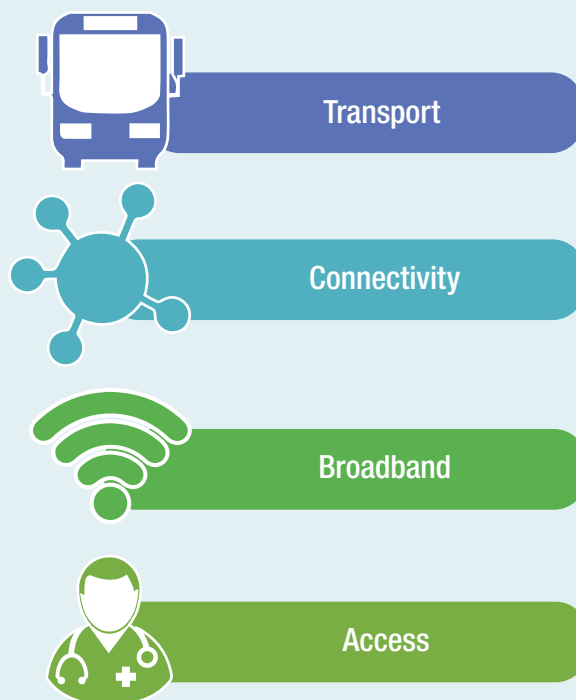
## Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity

To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.



### Programme for Government Outcomes

- **Outcome 1:** We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy.
- **Outcome 2:** We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.
- **Outcome 3:** We have a more equal society.
- **Outcome 11:** We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.



The following priority interventions have been developed for connectivity between urban and rural areas in NI:

- **Intervention 1 - Transport:** To support sustainable public transport services between rural areas and urban centres and encourage active and public transport usage that better meets the needs of rural dwellers.
- **Intervention 2 - Connectivity:** To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres.
- **Intervention 3 - Broadband:** To support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live.
- **Intervention 4 - Access:** To reduce barriers to accessing services in rural areas.



## Links to Draft Programme for Government Outcomes

We note that the Executive has recently launched a public consultation on its Programme for Government (PfG) Outcomes Framework 2021. The development work for the Rural Policy Framework was based on the existing draft PfG 2016-2021 outcomes. The outcomes listed below are from the existing draft PfG, however, should the proposed outcomes be accepted, they will be incorporated at the first opportunity (for ease of reference we have also listed the new corresponding proposed outcomes alongside the existing ones). The Rural Policy Framework for NI is intended to feed into the following eleven (or eight under the proposed outcomes) draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016-2021 outcomes:

Current PfG Outcome	Corresponding Proposed PfG Outcomes
<b>Outcome 1:</b> We prosper through a strong competitive regionally balanced economy.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral.
<b>Outcome 2:</b> We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment.
<b>Outcome 3:</b> We have a more equal society.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect.
<b>Outcome 4:</b> We enjoy long, healthy, active lifestyles.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives.
<b>Outcome 5:</b> We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral.
<b>Outcome 6:</b> We have more people working in better jobs.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> Everyone can reach their potential.
<b>Outcome 8:</b> We care for others and we help those in need.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives.
<b>Outcome 9:</b> We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect.
<b>Outcome 10:</b> We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> People want to live, work and visit here.
<b>Outcome 11:</b> We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.	<b>Proposed Outcomes:</b> Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral; Our children and young people have the best start in life.
<b>Outcome 12:</b> We give our children and young people the best start in life.	<b>Proposed Outcome:</b> Our children and young people have the best start in life.

## Key Principles

The following 14 key principles apply to the Rural Policy Framework for NI:

- The Framework will focus on addressing 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 PfG;
- The Framework will promote the piloting of new and innovative approaches to the challenges facing rural communities;
- The Framework will encourage partnership working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector;
- The Framework will recognise the important role played by the rural community sector and the need to encourage rural community empowerment;
- The Framework will encourage the mainstreaming of successful projects and the development of suitable exit strategies;
- The Framework will complement other rural initiatives including the Rural Needs Act 2016;
- The Framework will be cognisant of the fact that all Departments have responsibilities for rural areas;
- The Framework will promote sustainability through support for projects which deliver long term benefits for rural communities;
- The Framework will seek to promote equality and good relations in line with the Department's duties under Section 75;
- The Framework will 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;
- The Framework will promote the sharing of information (in line with UK data protection legislation), learning and best practice between organisations;
- The Framework will seek to complement the community planning process;
- The Framework will recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis; and
- The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme will continue whilst complementing and supporting the delivery of Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing of the Rural Policy Framework.

## Implementation

The Rural Policy Framework for NI sets out five thematic pillars incorporating nineteen priority areas for intervention that we want to achieve to help create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active. We will work towards achieving these interventions in relation to the policies, programmes and services we provide.

A key task will involve developing individual schemes into a new Programme entitled 'Rural Business and Community Investment Programme'. This new Programme will take into account any lessons learned from the Priority 6 element of the EU RDP. The Programme is anticipated to last for a minimum of 7 years to facilitate meaningful outcomes and to tie into the multi-year budget approach outlined in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. Any Programme and associated interventions require sufficient budgets and delivery mechanisms to realise the Framework's overarching vision and aim. The interventions should also complement each other and be strategic in both development and delivery.

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. We will take a holistic approach and work with other organisations in designing and implementing a programme of priority areas for intervention to be delivered under the Framework. These organisations will include other Departments, local councils, other public and/or private bodies and the rural community sector.

The Rural Policy Framework for NI will operate from 2022 onwards and the initial programme will be implemented over a period of 7 years. The programme will be published setting out details of any schemes to be funded. We expect that an interim evaluation of the programme will be completed in year four and recommendations implemented. The programme will be a living document that will be updated regularly during the lifetime of the Framework. This enables opportunities to make amendments to the schemes to be funded under the programme, according to the need at the time. The need for such flexibility and adaptability was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Monitoring and Reporting

DAERA is responsible for the Rural Policy Framework for NI and will have a co-ordinating role but each Department has responsibility for their respective departmental and policy areas.

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. It is also clear that there is strong support for a bottom up approach to form part of the solution to implementing a new programme.

To ensure that any future Programme can proactively respond to rural needs in a flexible way going forward we will establish a new cross-cutting Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee comprising senior managers from Departments and a range of stakeholders representing organisations with an interest in issues affecting rural communities. This Committee will be responsible for monitoring any future Programme, with regular updates provided on progress and expenditure. Whilst this committee will not have approval powers it will be able to highlight new need or reconfiguration of existing scheme(s) ensuring robust scrutiny of the Programme. Such an approach will provide opportunities to proactively respond to rural needs in a flexible way going forward, whilst also ensuring the best possible outcomes. We expect that an update will be provided to the oversight committee twice per year or ad hoc as required. It is anticipated that the 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. These structures will ensure that there is a formal mechanism in place to support a collaborative approach with key stakeholders and delivery partners in the design, development and delivery of future programmes.

Indicators emanating from the nineteen priority intervention will be developed to assist with the monitoring of the effectiveness of the Framework. These indicators will be developed during Year One of the Framework. Whilst some indicators will be clearly associated with one particular priority intervention, other indicators will be cross-cutting and relevant across a number of priority areas for intervention.

There will be ongoing monitoring of the indicators to determine whether the actions we are taking are having an impact, how the indicators are being achieved and whether or not we are creating a sustainable and environmentally responsible rural community where people want to live, work and be active.

Reporting and any updates to the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee will be proportionate and meaningful, so it can clearly be seen whether or not the Framework is making an impact. It is our intention that, as far as possible, reporting arrangements will be aligned with the reporting arrangements for the PfG. Data will be made available to our stakeholders and the public so they can see what progress is being made.

## Equality and Rural Needs Considerations

An Equality Screening and Human Rights screening exercise and Rural Needs Impact Assessment were carried out in relation to the Rural Policy Framework. Screening exercises will also be carried out in respect of individual schemes under the Rural Business and Community Investment Programme.

## Regular Review

Regular reviews of the Rural Policy Framework will be considered to ensure that the Framework takes account of new issues affecting rural communities that might emerge over its lifetime.

## Evaluation

Each intervention funded under the Rural Policy Framework for NI will be subject to an evaluation following its completion. An evaluation of the Framework will be undertaken prior to the development of any future Framework.

## Next Steps

The Department will establish the Rural Stakeholder Oversight Committee and its respective sub-committees. Subsequently, DAERA will start developing and implementing the new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme.

**For further information:**

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