

# Rural Policy Framework for NI



March 2022

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



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

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## 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

# Executive Summary

## 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.

<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 the 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 and 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.

## 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.

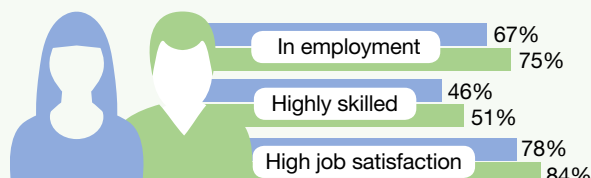
# Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Statistics

● = Urban   ● = Mixed   ● = Rural

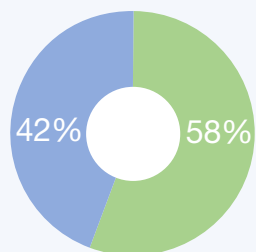
## Population Growth, 2001-2018



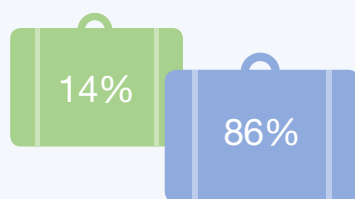
## Job Quality 2018



## Businesses 2019



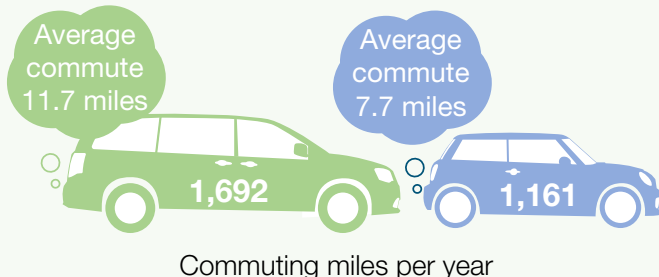
## Tourism Expenditure 2018



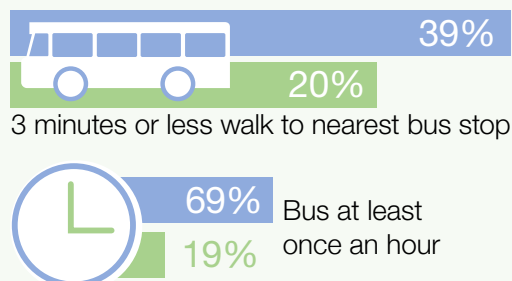
## Median Annual Salary 2019



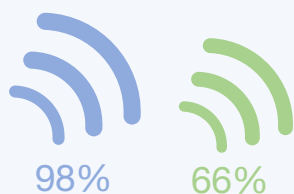
## 2016-18



## Public Transport 2016-18



## Coverage of Superfast Broadband 2019



## People in Absolute Poverty 2018/19

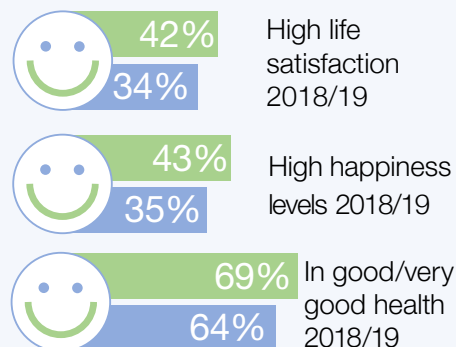
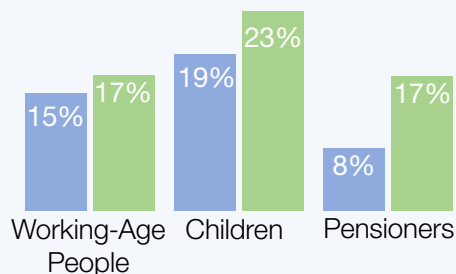


Figure 1: Taken from Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2020 report available at:

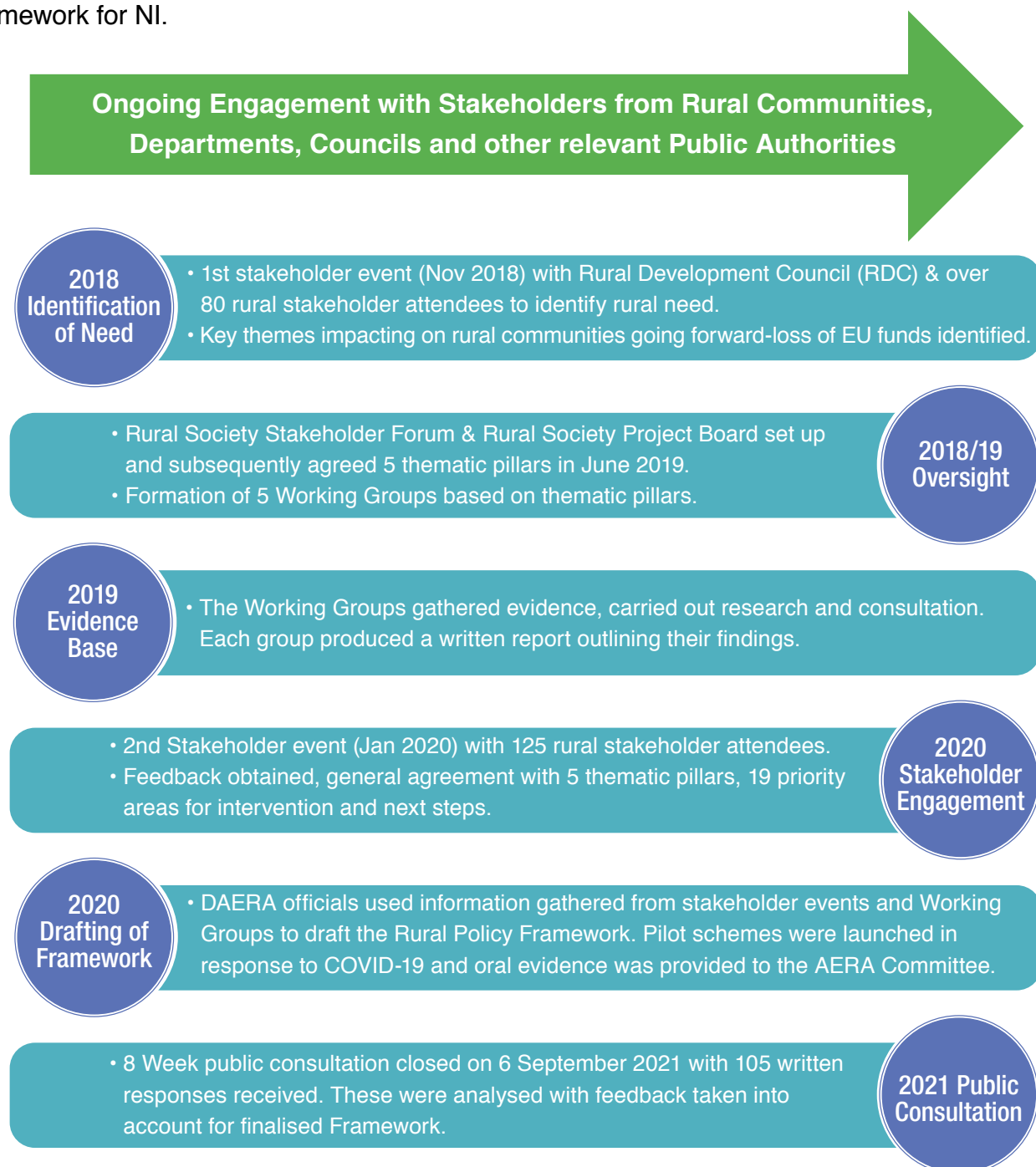
[https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic\\_0.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic_0.pdf)



## 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 'Rural Business and Community Investment Programme'.

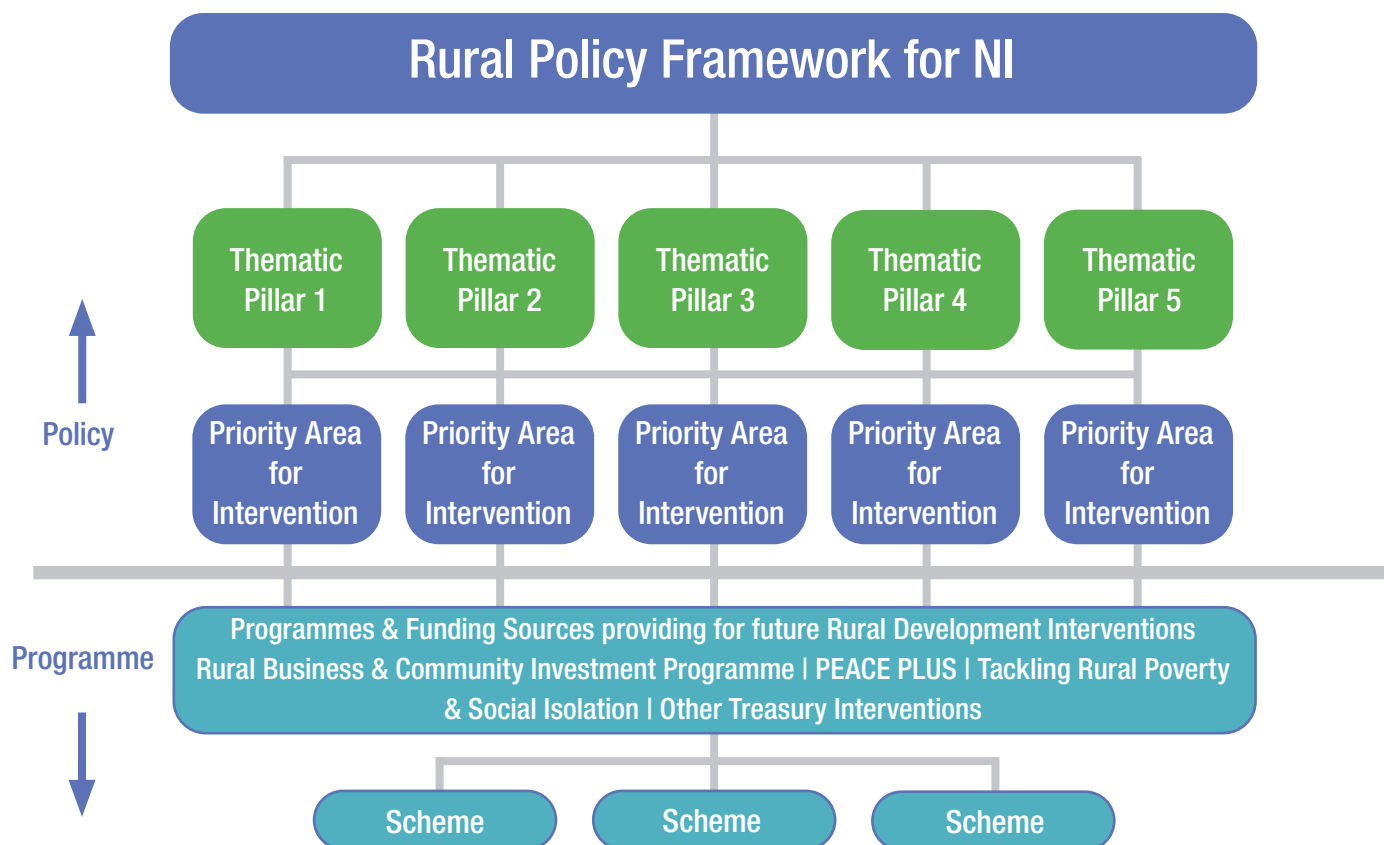


Figure 3: Overview of Rural Policy Framework for NI.

## 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.

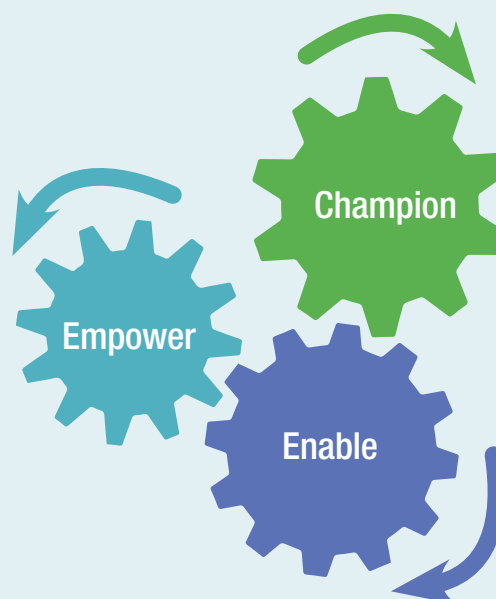
### Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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.

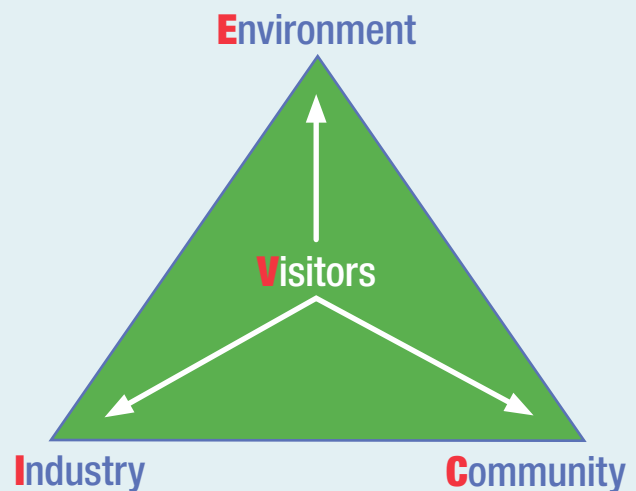
## Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism

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.



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.

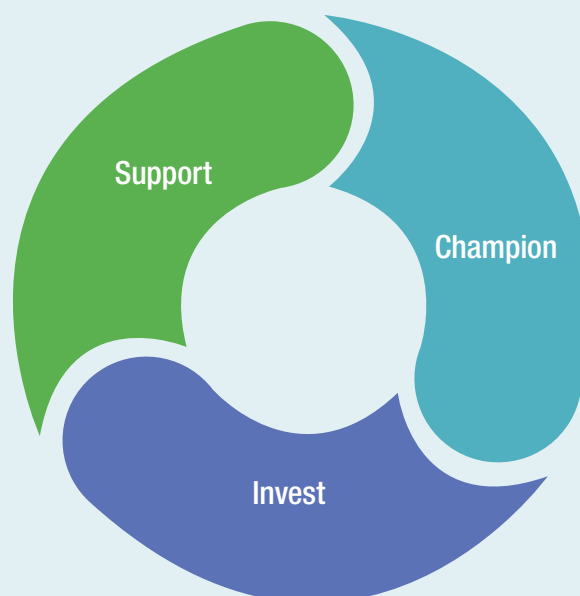
## Thematic Pillar 4: Employment

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.

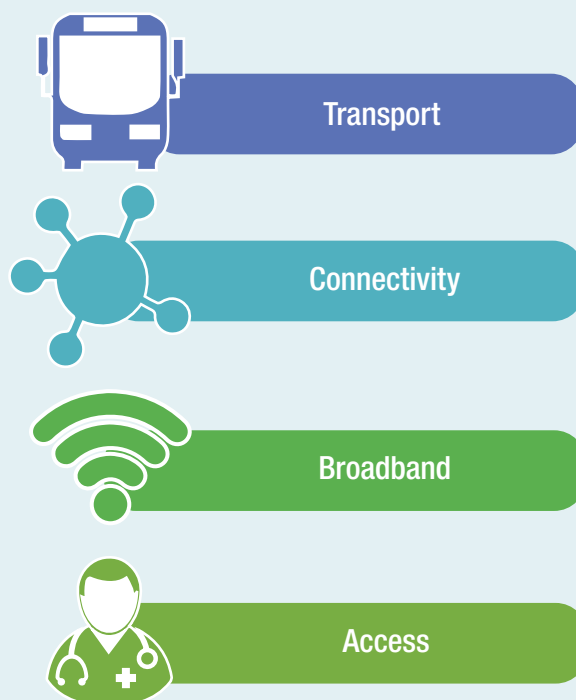
## Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity

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 into the Framework (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) 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:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will promote the piloting of new and innovative approaches to the challenges facing rural communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will encourage partnership working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will recognise the important role played by the rural community sector and the need to encourage rural community empowerment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will encourage the mainstreaming of successful projects and the development of suitable exit strategies.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will complement other rural initiatives including the Rural Needs Act 2016.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will be cognisant of the fact that all Departments have responsibilities for rural areas.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will promote sustainability through support for projects which deliver long term benefits for rural communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will seek to promote equality and good relations in line with the Department's duties under Section 75.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will promote the sharing of information (in line with UK data protection legislation), learning and best practice between organisations.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will seek to complement the community planning process.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Framework will recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>

## 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.

To test a number of assumptions emanating from the Rural Policy Framework 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.

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, TRPSI programme and the pilot schemes. 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 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 was 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. These screening exercises will determine whether or not a full EQIA is required.

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.

## 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.

## 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 (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 will not always be appropriate. For example:

- Accessing key public services is more difficult for rural communities than their urban counterparts. In some rural areas access to public services is impossible without private transport;
- The cost of living is higher in rural areas;
- Broadband speed and availability, though improving, are still much lower in rural than in urban areas;
- The rural and urban economies differ in terms of industry sector, with rural businesses predominantly engaged in agriculture, forestry, engineering, and construction, whereas urban businesses are more widely spread across a variety of sectors.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism had been a key growth sector within the NI economy in terms of employment and economic growth. Development work on the Rural Policy Framework for NI including extensive stakeholder engagement commenced prior to COVID-19. 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.

The cessation of funding via Priority 6 (LEADER and Rural Tourism) of the European Union (EU) approved Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 has provided us with a unique opportunity to take stock. The EU Priority 6 provides for promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

The LEADER and Tourism measures provided around £80 million over the course of the current RDP, 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.

A Rural Policy Framework for NI provides an opportunity for us to review our approach to rural policy based on clearly identified need and what is required to support rural communities within the context of the following main strategic drivers: the impact of COVID-19 on our rural communities; Green Growth; opportunities for new ways of working and funding post RDP; the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government; and the New Decade, New Approach Deal. The overarching Rural Policy Framework has been comprehensive in addressing a range of policy agendas that impact on rural prosperity, wellbeing and quality of life. It also provides an opportunity to ensure that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework continues to operate parallel under the umbrella of the third Thematic Pillar. It became clear throughout the response to the COVID-19 pandemic that the flexibility of the TRPSI programme was crucial to delivering timely interventions where they were most needed. Feedback throughout early stakeholder engagement also highlighted the positive outcomes of the TRPSI programme which has benefitted many rural dwellers each year.

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

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 which has ultimately changed the landscape of the economy and the baseline employment rate.

Individual schemes will then be developed into a new Programme entitled 'Rural Business and Community Investment Programme'. This new Programme will take lessons learned from Priority

6 of the EU Rural Development measures and other rural initiatives and 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.

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.

Annexes 1-2 contains a summary of key definitions, terminology and abbreviations used throughout this document. Annex 3 also provides a list of sources used to establish our evidence base and inform the need identified in this Framework.

The next section outlines our overarching vision for rural communities.



## A Vision for Rural

In developing a vision and aim for the Rural Policy Framework for NI, a wide range of Executive and other governmental policies have been taken into account such as:

- Draft Programme for Government;
- New Decade, New Approach Deal; and
- Green Growth Strategy.

The impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, in particular the need for flexibility to respond quickly to emerging needs including the opportunity for new ways of working was also taken on board.

## Rural Policy Framework Vision

We believe that the Rural Policy Framework for NI should be driven by the overarching DAERA vision which is:

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

Whilst DAERA, through the work of Rural Affairs feeds into numerous outcomes in the Draft PfG, the Department has lead responsibility for PfG Outcome 2 “We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment”.

In pursuit of DAERA’s overarching vision, a key strategic priority for the Department is Strategic Priority 3: To champion thriving rural communities that contribute to prosperity and wellbeing. The Rural Affairs Division currently feeds into this Strategic Priority and associated vision through a number of key vehicles such as:

- Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016;
- Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI); and
- Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 - Priority 6.

The Rural Policy Framework has provided an opportunity to take stock to ensure that the needs of rural communities continue to be appropriately addressed, particularly in light of new opportunities post Priority 6 of the RDP.



We have outlined in the table below, how we believe each Thematic Pillar identified within this Framework adheres to the vision outlined above:

Thematic Pillar	Linkages to Vision: Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship</b> - To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas will help rural businesses develop and grow thereby maintaining a working rural landscape. Support for innovation in the delivery of public services will help provide better access to key services for people in rural areas thereby encouraging them to continue to live there and maintaining a living rural landscape.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism</b> - To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting the development of sustainable rural tourism will help make the rural landscape more active and help ensure more people across Northern Ireland visit our rural areas and value our rural landscape.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing</b> - To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tackling the effects of rural isolation will help overcome some of the biggest challenges of living in a rural area thereby ensuring that people can continue to live and thrive in rural areas and maintain a living rural landscape.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 4: Employment</b> - To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the number and quality of job opportunities available to people in rural areas will help to ensure that people can continue to live there thereby maintaining a living working rural landscape.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity</b> - To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improving connectivity between urban and rural areas will help to ensure that rural businesses are more competitive and help improve the economic and social wellbeing of people in rural areas thereby maintaining a living working rural landscape.</li> </ul>

## Rural Policy Framework Aim

The overarching 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.**

Championing thriving rural communities that contribute to prosperity and wellbeing has synergies with the draft PfG and Industrial Strategy where we prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy and have more people working in better jobs. Given the impact that the removal of EU funds has on the ability to deliver on this strategic priority, it is essential all government departments and statutory bodies work collaboratively to successfully deliver better outcomes for our communities. Furthermore, the New Decade, New Approach Deal document makes it clear that from 2021/22 there will be multi-year budgets so it is imperative that long-term outcomes are considered.

We believe that rural dwellers should be helped to ensure that they:

- Can avail of new opportunities arising following the loss of EU funds;
- Maximise their contribution to the overall NI economy in the future; and
- Ensure the future sustainability of our rural communities.

During the public consultation process, respondents noted that there was a need for rural communities that older, young and disabled people actually want to remain in.

The next section outlines some key strategic drivers for change that were taken into account during the development of the Rural Policy Framework for NI.

## Background - Informing the Framework

### Strategic Context - Key Drivers for Change

A Rural Policy Framework for NI provides rural communities an opportunity to review the 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 our rural communities; Green Growth; opportunities for new ways of working and funding post RDP; the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government; and the New Decade, New Approach Deal. The overarching Rural Policy Framework has been comprehensive in addressing a range of policy agendas that impact on rural prosperity, wellbeing and quality of life. Some of the key strategic drivers are outlined in more detail below.

#### **Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Communities**

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.

#### **Draft Programme for Government (PfG) Framework**

At the time of writing, the Executive had launched a public consultation on its Programme for Government (PfG) Outcomes Framework 2021<sup>2</sup> which proposes to build upon the current outcomes-based approach whilst aligning to a long term multi-year budget. Our development work for the Rural Policy Framework has been based on the existing draft PfG 2016-2021 outcomes. Should the proposed outcomes be endorsed, they will be incorporated. We would still

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government-pfg>

expect to contribute to the majority of the new proposed outcomes through the implementation of interventions suggested within the Rural Policy Framework for NI.

The current draft PfG framework 2016-2021 sets out Government's ambition for improving the lives of everyone in NI with 12 strategic outcomes supported by indicators, which, taken together, the Executive believes best describes the society we wish to have. A key feature is collaborative working between organisations and groups, whether in the public, voluntary, or private sectors which reflects the cross-cutting nature of the challenges facing rural communities. Our cross-cutting Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland contributes to 11 of the 12 strategic outcomes.

### **New Decade, New Approach Deal (January 2020)<sup>3</sup>**

The New Decade, New Approach Deal published in January 2020 outlined commitments from both the UK and the Irish Governments to restore devolved government in NI.

The priority for the NI Executive is to develop a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all, ensuring that through investment for the future that NI can harness opportunities and drive sustainable productivity, including opportunities for future trade as the UK leaves the EU. There are a number of commitments referred to in the agreement for the NI Executive to take forward which would complement some of the Thematic Pillars and associated Priority Areas for Intervention outlined within the Rural Policy Framework such as:

- Delivery of essential infrastructure projects in order to build a NI that is equipped for a prosperous shared future;
- Realise the economic potential offered by City Deals including through match capital funding for infrastructure, regeneration and tourism projects;
- Developing and delivering Growth Deals for Mid, South, West Northern Ireland and Causeway Coast and Glens;
- Tackle climate change head on;
- Develop an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and support economic growth;
- Identify resources to deliver extended, affordable and high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4; and
- Development of key strategies, many of which are likely to have linkages to the thematic pillars outlined in this Rural Policy Framework.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/news/deal-to-see-restored-government-in-northern-ireland-tomorrow](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/deal-to-see-restored-government-in-northern-ireland-tomorrow)

Furthermore, the Irish Government committed to working with the NI Executive and the UK Government to achieve greater connectivity on the island - by road, rail and air. In addition, the potential was highlighted for other projects including Greenways in border areas which contribute to sustainable tourism and other enterprise benefits for the region. The Irish Government also noted that they will continue to work with EU partners, the UK Government and NI Executive to ensure that the PEACE PLUS programme will be delivered. Again, these commitments are all complementary to this Rural Policy Framework for NI.

## Other Strategic Considerations

### **DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025<sup>4</sup>**

The DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025 mission is to develop an innovation ecosystem delivering for the environment, societal wellbeing and the rural economy. The Innovation Strategy recognised that society faces many challenges including global ones impacting negatively on the environment such as climate change; land and ecosystem degradation; and waste management. Innovations are needed to help transform how we live and work.

The innovation strategy used the following definition in regards to innovation: *'the successful generation and exploitation of new ideas. It is about transforming creative thinking into new products, new and improved processes and technologies to support new ways of doing business'*.<sup>5</sup> In many cases, it relates to the novel use or application of knowledge or information already held, to yield products or outcomes of enhanced economic, social or natural capital value.

### **Draft Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland<sup>6</sup>**

DAERA recognises the strategic importance of innovation in addressing the wider climate change, environmental and social challenges associated with growing and rebalancing the NI economy.

NI's environment is its most important asset and it is crucial to each and every one of us. Clean air, good quality water and the green and blue spaces, to which we have access, are part of our 'natural capital' (i.e. our stock of natural resources, including geology, soils, air, water and all living organisms). Effective care of the environment provides very real benefits in terms of improving health and wellbeing, promoting economic development and addressing the social problems which result from a poor quality environment.

4 Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/20.21.143%20DAERA%20Innovation%20Strategy%20Final%20%281%29.PDF>

5 Innovate NI Innovation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014 - 2025

6 Available at: [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Green%20Growth\\_Brochure%20V8.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Green%20Growth_Brochure%20V8.pdf)

The Green Growth Strategy is the Northern Ireland Executive's multi-decade strategy, balancing climate, environment and the economy in Northern Ireland. It sets out the long-term vision and a solid framework for tackling the climate crisis in the right way. Green Growth means using the move from a high to a low greenhouse gas emissions economy to improve people's quality of life through green jobs and a clean environment. Green Growth aims to transform our society towards net zero by 2050, protect and enhance our environment and deliver sustainable economic growth and will involve the development and co-design of a multi-decade Strategy and Delivery Framework.

Following on from the COVID-19 pandemic, people's expectations and values have changed in relation to environmental improvement and reinforced the need for Green Recovery and to "build back better".

### **Draft DfE Economy 2030: Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland (2017)<sup>7</sup>**

The Draft Economy 2030 Strategy proposed that the following vision for NI: *'To be a globally competitive economy that works for everyone'*. This vision embraces the twin themes of competitiveness and wellbeing. Following on from the economic transformation in 2017, DfE identified five pillars on which the Economy 2030 Strategy is based as follows:

- Accelerating innovation and research;
- Enhancing education, skills and employability;
- Driving inclusive, sustainable growth;
- Succeeding in global markets; and
- Building the best infrastructure.

NI needs a culture which supports, prioritises and celebrates innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. It should become a place where they are embedded across the entire education system, supporting skills development to meet the needs of industry. By tackling its disadvantages the measures will deliver a more enterprising region that is able to compete globally in various sectors.

Turning NI into a leading, internationally competitive economy is essential if we are to deliver the economic outcomes that we want for our people such as increased employment and rising incomes. Competitiveness will drive export-led growth and for a small economy like NI we need to sell beyond our shores to generate wealth.

## Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

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.

<sup>7</sup> Available at: [www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/industrial-strategy](http://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/industrial-strategy)

The Act was introduced to ensure that consideration of the needs of people in rural areas becomes more firmly embedded within public authorities. The Act seeks to help deliver fairer and more equitable treatment for people in rural areas by requiring public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing and revising policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services. This will help to deliver better outcomes for people in rural areas and help make rural communities more sustainable. In having due regard to rural needs, a public authority should consider all relevant information and ensure that the policy, strategy, plan or public service is influenced appropriately. This could involve:

- Acting as a Rural Champion and lobbying for rural needs to be reflected in policy development and delivery;
- Working with other Departments and other public agencies on an integrated approach to ensure that the particular characteristics of rural life and associated deprivation characteristics are recognised and addressed; and
- Supporting rural groups and networks to articulate rural needs to policy makers and influencers.

DAERA is not solely responsible for rural issues. All Departments have responsibilities in relation to rural areas. Each Department should comply fully with their statutory duties under the Rural Needs Act and work collaboratively in seeking to address the needs of people in rural areas. The Act 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.

## Other Rural Initiatives

### **Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 - Priority 6**

The current RDP is supported through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. The EU has three objectives for the development of rural areas as follows:

- Improving competitiveness in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors;
- Safeguarding and enhancing the rural environment; and
- Fostering competitive and sustainable rural businesses and thriving rural communities.

The 2014-2020 RDP provides up to £545 million of EU funding over the course of its lifetime with around £80 million attributed to non-agricultural activities supporting wider rural development under Priority 6. Some additional information on how this aspect of the programme has been delivered to date is provided below.

Priority 6 is a European Community Initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity in their local area. Priority 6 aims to increase the capacity of local rural community and business networks to build knowledge and skills, innovate and co-operate in order to tackle local development objectives. It provides support to promote social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. Ten voluntary Local Action Groups (LAGs) made up of local government representatives and social partners deliver the Priority 6 Schemes on behalf of DAERA. Each LAG was allocated a rural development budget to enable them to pursue the strategic objective set out in the Local Rural Development Strategy they compiled for the area they represent. LAGs were permitted to spend up to 22% of the value of their projects on animation activities and administration.

The Priority 6 programme has included work that supports rural businesses, rural tourism, basic services in rural areas, rural broadband and village renewal. The Programme has provided some very notable successes such as the creation of 1,032 Full Time and 220 Part Time jobs (i.e. 1,144 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs) at December 2021 under the Rural Business Investment Scheme. There has also been a total investment in rural areas of over £70m.

The Rural Tourism Scheme provides funding to invest in natural and built heritage projects that can act as a key driver for encouraging rural tourism and particularly out of state visitors, whilst preserving the built and natural assets of the rural community and also stimulating economic activity.

Projects funded to date and currently under development are typically:

- Capital infrastructure;
- Increasing numbers of out of state visitors;
- Job creating;
- Promoting/encouraging a partnership approach with other statutory organisations; and
- Flagship, unique, high impact rural tourism-focused actions.

By December 2021, 19 Rural Tourism Scheme projects have been funded to the value of £9m.



Lessons learned will be taken from the current RDP to ensure that any new programme stemming from the Rural Policy Framework for NI builds upon the legacy of successful interventions under Priority 6 of the RDP.

### **Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework**

While poverty and social isolation exist in both urban areas and rural areas it is recognised that those living in rural areas often experience poverty and social isolation differently due to issues relating to geographical isolation, lower population density and the dispersed nature of many rural settlements. Living in a rural area can also exacerbate the effects of poverty and social isolation for certain groups. For example, additional costs of living in a rural area such as higher fuel or transport costs can have a greater impact on people on low incomes while some groups such as young people or people with disabilities may experience greater difficulties accessing transport services in rural areas than in urban settings. The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework is a rural initiative led by DAERA, which aims to tackle poverty and social isolation in rural areas through organisations working in partnership to design and implement measures, which target the needs of vulnerable people.

As no one single Department has the responsibility for rural issues, and all Departments have functions which can contribute to alleviating the impact of poverty and social isolation, the TRPSI Framework provides a mechanism through which Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural sector were able to work in partnership to develop new and innovative ways to help alleviate the effects of poverty and social isolation in rural areas, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Our TRPSI Framework promotes the sharing of learning and expertise and ensures benefits are gained through a collaborative approach that can lever additional resources for the benefit of rural communities. It also facilitates the piloting of new or innovative projects. The revised TRPSI Framework has been in place since 2016 and in 2021/22 had a budget of almost £8.3m to help rural communities, businesses and dwellers to address localised and regional poverty, isolation and health and wellbeing issues. TRPSI benefits many rural dwellers per year. TRPSI supports a wide range of schemes and examples of the most recent initiatives supported include:

- **Rural Business Development Grant Pilot Scheme** - provides development grants of between £500 and £4,999 to micro-enterprises based in rural areas to help them to sustain or grow.
- **Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme** - provides grants of between £200 and £1,500 to rural community-led voluntary organisations for tackling issues of local poverty and/or social isolation.

- **Assisted Rural Travel Scheme (ARTS)** - this scheme is delivered in conjunction with Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and allows rural dwellers with a valid SmartPass to access concessionary travel on Rural Community Transport Partnership vehicles in all areas of NI.
- **Farm Families Health Checks Programme** - in conjunction with the Public Health Authority (PHA) this is delivered by qualified Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) nurses who provide a holistic screening service, including health screening, advice and signposting services for rural dwellers at farmer's markets and community venues.
- **Community Development** - six Rural Community Networks (RCNs) provide a local community development support and advice service across all of rural NI provide this support.
- **Rural Support** - this organisation operates a helpline that provides a listening ear and signposting service for farmers and rural dwellers.
- **Social Farming Support Service** - this support service provided by Rural Support operates as a hub for Social Farming that provides disadvantaged groups of people in NI with an opportunity for inclusion, to increase their self-esteem and to improve their health and wellbeing.
- **Step Up to Sustainable Employment (SUSE+)** - aims to engage with unemployed, economically inactive and socio-economically deprived individuals.
- **Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP)** - administered by DfC and supported by DAERA at a regional level to ensure the voluntary and community sector has access to the support it needs to function effectively and efficiently. The Rural Community Network (RCN) and Northern Ireland Regional Women's Network (NIRWN) receive funding for providing the rural element of RISP.
- **Rural Community Recreational Facilities Scheme** - an Outdoor Spaces Programme that involves joint collaboration between DAERA, DfC, Sport NI and PHA to invest in sporting and recreational facilities in rural areas, namely multi-use community trails.
- **Forest Parks Enhancement Scheme** - in conjunction with Councils and Forest Service this scheme funds the development of safe, way marked, off-road cycling/walking trails and visitor facilities within forests.
- **SPRING Social Prescribing** - this enables medical professionals to refer their patients to Social Prescribers who in turn link clients to a range of local activities and community services that seek to address people's needs in a holistic way.

- **Village Catalyst Project** - this is a partnership between Historic Environment Division (HED), the Architectural Heritage Fund, DAERA and local community social enterprise groups. It aims to restore disused historic villages in rural villages, increase opportunities for a range of local social engagement activities by improving access to key services in rural areas through the provision of enhanced facilities and ultimately act as a catalyst for further regeneration in rural villages.
- **Your School, Your Club** - this partnership initiative in conjunction with the DE, Education Authority, Department for Communities (DfC), local Councils and Sport NI contributes to addressing the unmet demand for sporting and recreational facilities across NI by opening up educational sites for local community usage outside of normal school hours.
- **Libraries NI Out of Hours** - in partnership with the DfC the Libraries 'Out of Hours Service' has provided extended access to library facilities in a number of rural areas. Using a unique identifier PIN code, users can avail of a range of services including access to the public computer network and Wi-Fi, borrow books, access study facilities and, where available, make use of meeting room facilities.
- **Prosper Employability Project** - this project provides mentoring support to young people and specific vocational training leading to qualifications identified by local employers. Training is available across a range of occupational areas e.g. CAT C lorry driving, forklift driving, Emergency First Aid at Work, Customer Services and SIA door security & CCTV training.

It is important that DAERA's role is one that adds value and provides value for money. The TRPSI Framework is a model under which DAERA adds value through working in partnership with other public authorities to deliver positive tangible benefits for people in rural areas by promoting innovative solutions to challenges relating to poverty and social isolation in rural areas and supporting pilot projects.

The Department is fully committed to continuing the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme and ensuring that it complements and supports the delivery of Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing of the Rural Policy Framework. It became very clear to us throughout the pandemic that the flexible approach of TRPSI was invaluable in responding quickly to local emerging and rapidly changing needs. In particular, the benefits of the collaborative approach of TRPSI and the importance of local decision making and capacity building through grassroots structures such as Rural Support Networks were invaluable. We believe that lessons learned should be taken from the current TRPSI programme and that a revised and stronger programme is built upon going forward.

## Rural White Paper Action Plan (RWPAP)<sup>8</sup>

The NI Executive acknowledges that no single Department has exclusive responsibility for rural areas. The Executive's Rural White Paper Action Plan provides a Framework for Ministers to work effectively together in seeking to address the main issues and challenges facing rural areas. The Action Plan was launched in 2012 and was the first cross-departmental initiative in NI to focus solely on rural areas. The Action Plan set out the Executive's vision and policy priorities for rural areas and included over 90 actions from across all Departments covering a wide range of rural issues including rural broadband, healthcare, rural tourism, poverty and social inclusion, housing, rural transport and planning.

The next section provides a detailed overview of the stakeholder engagement we have carried out.

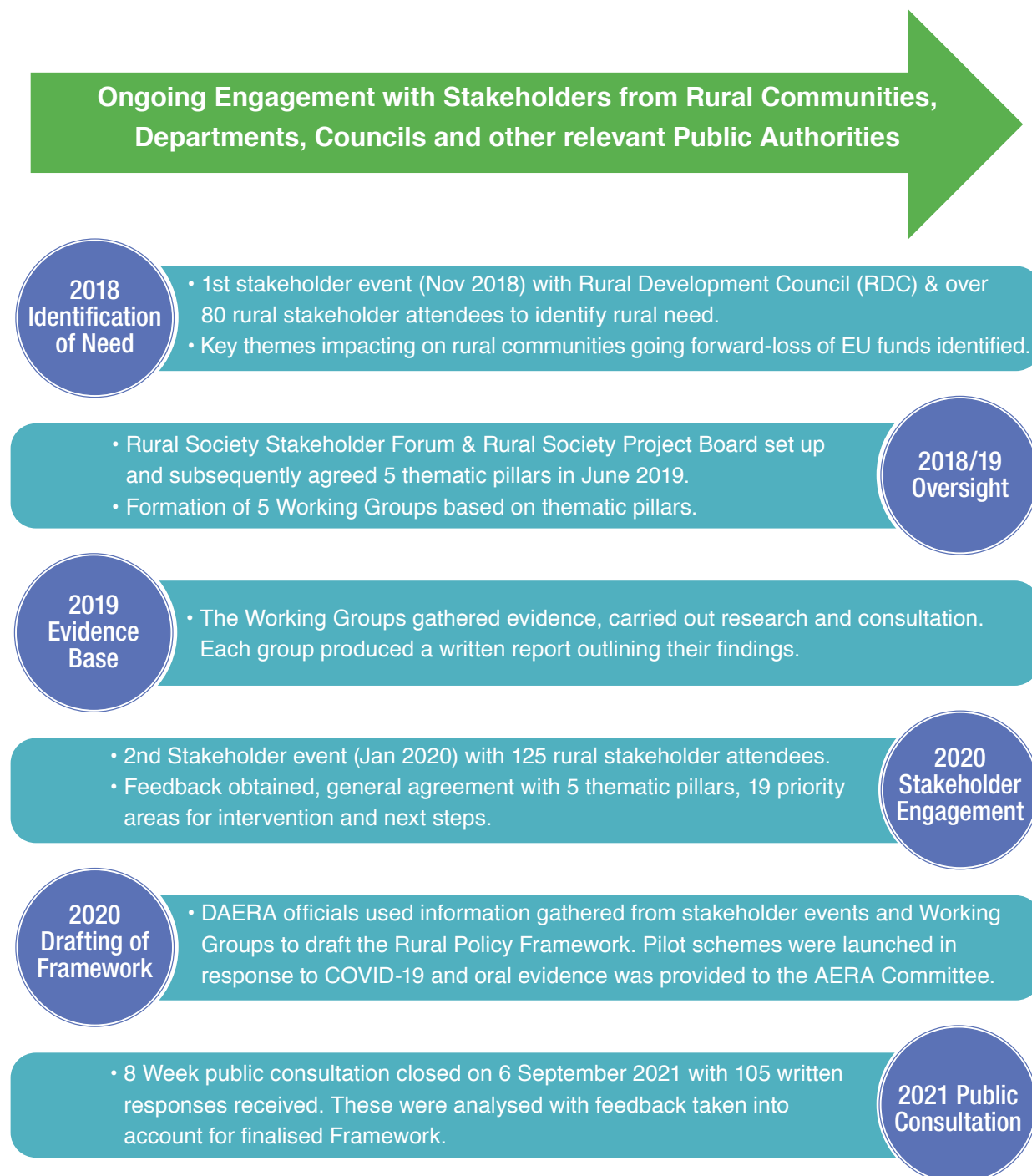


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<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/rural-white-paper-action-plan-and-progress-reports>

## Stakeholder Engagement

Figure 4 below provides a brief summary of our stakeholder engagement on the Rural Policy Framework for NI.



*Figure 4: Summary of Stakeholder Engagement.*

The section below provides a more detailed explanation of our stakeholder engagement carried out to date prior to formal public consultation stage.

We recognised that the cessation of the EU funding has the potential to significantly impact on people in rural areas in Northern Ireland, in particular funding previously provided under the Priority 6 element of the EU Rural Development Programme. Therefore, in November 2018 a stakeholder event with the Rural Development Council and over 80 rural stakeholders attending identified what the policy intervention (the need) was likely to be in rural communities following the loss of EU funds. The need identified at that event formed the basis for five key themes.

We established a Rural Society Stakeholder Forum in 2018 to assist it with exploring a possible future rural policy agenda. The Department also established a cross-departmental Rural Society Project Board tasked with considering the impacts of the loss of EU funding on rural society, identifying how cross-departmental working can benefit rural dwellers and supporting the development of a Rural Policy Framework for NI. In late 2018 and 2019 there followed a period of consultation, engagement and desk research with a range of rural stakeholders. The Stakeholder Forum and Project Board agreed five thematic pillars in June 2019 that a longer term rural policy framework would use to respond to that loss of EU funding and the challenges facing rural NI.

Subsequently, informal engagement was carried out with key rural stakeholders on the five thematic pillars, and five Rural Society Working Groups were established to take forward work on identifying potential priority interventions. These would be undertaken to help deliver the five thematic pillars. The Working Groups were established on the principle of collaborative working and included representatives of DAERA, other departments, councils, rural stakeholders and other relevant public authorities. The Department then engaged with stakeholders via public consultation to ensure that the appropriate needs had been identified. Figure 5 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 'Rural Business and Community Investment Programme'. This new Programme will seek to take lessons learned from all previous interventions including the Priority 6 element of the EU RDP and other rural initiatives.

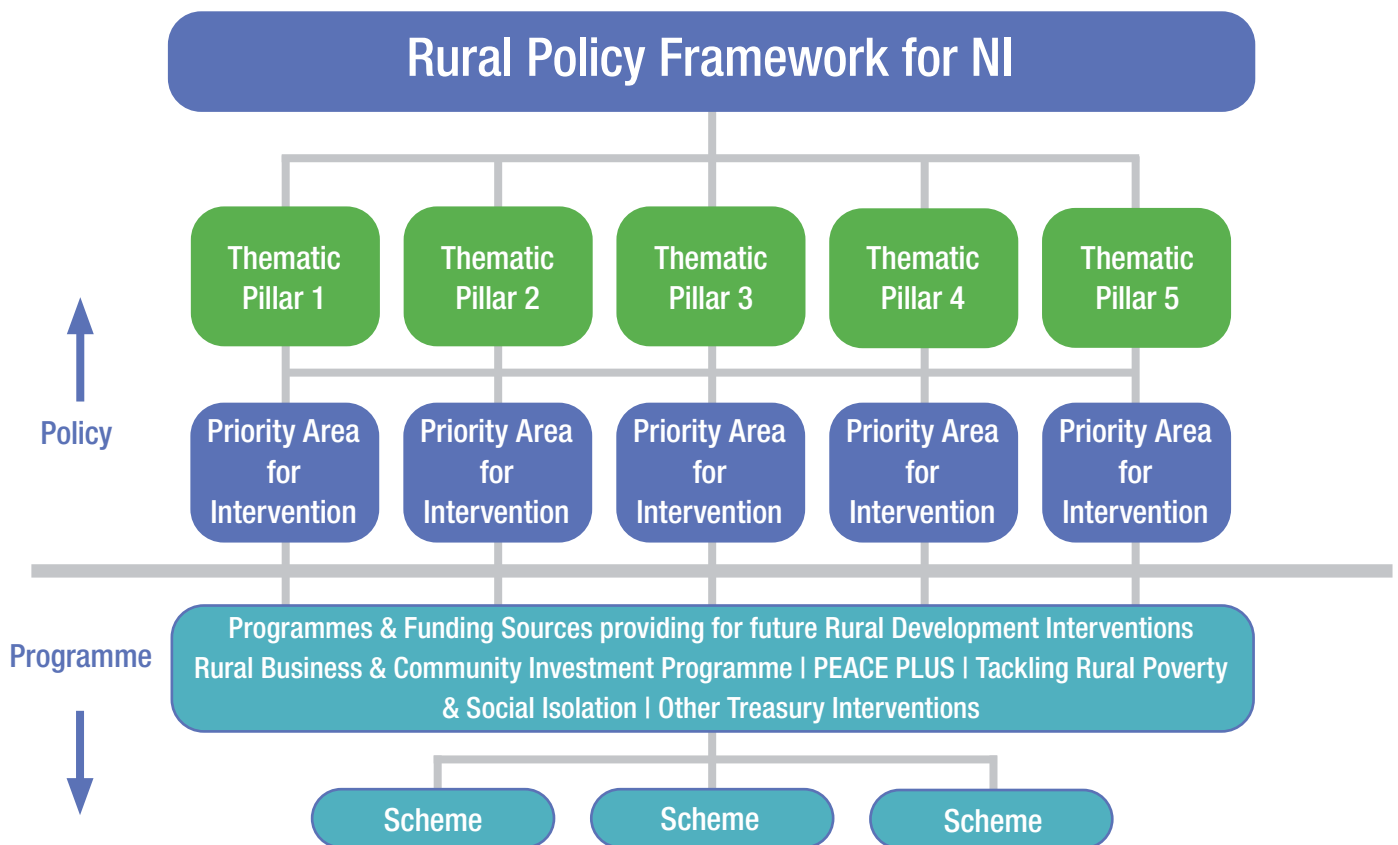


Figure 5: Overview of Rural Policy Framework for NI.

Each Working Group produced a written report that considered the evidence for policy intervention including the identification of potential priority interventions. These reports have been used to feed into the drafting of the Rural Policy Framework for NI.

A formal public rural stakeholder engagement event entitled '*Working Towards A New Rural Framework*' was held on 16 January 2020 in Loughry College, Cookstown. The chairs of each of the five Working Groups delivered a presentation outlining issues identified, evidence base and potential priority interventions identified. Each presentation was followed by round-table discussions with attendees.

This event provided an opportunity for the Department to obtain feedback from 125 key stakeholders (a list of organisations represented is included in Annex 4) on the proposals for the development of the Rural Policy Framework for NI. On the day there was strong endorsement from the attendees in relation to the Thematic Pillars and associated priority interventions within the Framework. Issues raised by stakeholders included: transport and infrastructure; rural regeneration of villages; rural isolation and poverty; future funding, health and wellbeing; and the wider impacts of loss of EU Funding on the rural economy. The common issue identified across all Thematic Pillars was the need for improved Broadband connectivity in rural areas. The information gathered at the stakeholder engagement event has been used to inform the Rural Policy Framework for NI. Annex 5 outlines the key messages highlighted by stakeholders on the day.

Our evidence gathering and drafting of the Rural Policy Framework for NI was at a fairly advanced stage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout 2020, we had the unique opportunity to launch a number of pilot schemes. The purpose of these pilots were to test the assumptions emerging from the draft Framework; to assist us further in the policy development process taking into account emerging needs; and to provide practical and much needed intervention support to rural businesses and communities. Central to the pilots was the ability to address rural need in a sustainable way through minimising any gap between existing support programmes and new programmes. We will be completing full evaluations of each of the pilots in the near future, although, it was clear that there is a renewed appreciation for access to nature, Green Growth, and sustainability in a post COVID-19 world. The pilots launched to date include: a Website Development Initiative with Tourism NI; a Rural Micro-Business Growth Scheme; a Tourism Collaboration Experiences Scheme; a Rural Social Economy Investment Scheme; a Micro Food Business Investment Scheme; a Rural Halls Refurbishment Scheme; and a Rural Community Pollinator Scheme.

We also had the opportunity to present oral evidence on the draft Rural Policy Framework for NI and pilot schemes to the AERA Committee on 26 November 2020.

The online public consultation exercise ran for a period of 8 weeks from 7 July 2021 until 6 September 2021. There was an extensive social media marketing campaign; a number of Press Releases; and a radio interview. Throughout the consultation period DAERA held 7 online WebEx events with 129 attendees from a wide range of rural stakeholders. There were 105 written consultation responses received. It should also be noted that seven rural support networks who responded to this consultation represented 915 community and voluntary groups.

The next section provides an overview of some key rural statistics and information available at a high level.



# Rural Statistics and Information

## Introduction

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 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.

The statistical and other information set out below is intended to provide a broad overview of many of the key issues affecting rural communities. More detailed information can be found in the 'Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2020' report.<sup>9</sup>

In the first instance it is important to understand what is meant by the term 'rural' which is outlined in more detail in the next section.

### Definition of Rural

Whilst there is no single definition of what the term 'rural' means, in 2015 the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) recommended a default, that settlements with a population of less than 5,000, and areas of open countryside should be defined as rural. The classification also took into account service provision and incorporated measures of distance to each settlement as within or outside 20 and 30 minute drive times of a medium or larger town with a population of 10,000 or more. These measures were intended as proxies for accessibility, as previous research has indicated that towns of this size are large enough to provide access to all key services and those rural areas in their vicinity are likely to thrive. Market towns are likely to have connections with city regions and linkages between urban and rural areas are beneficial to both.

The next section includes some of the key findings affecting rural communities at a NI regional level as identified by the Policy, Economics and Statistics Division within DAERA in the 'Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2020' Report.

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20-%20Final.pdf>

## Key Statistical Rural Issues Findings - NI Region

The infographic in Figure 6 below provides a brief overview of the key issues affecting both urban and rural areas and the differences between the two.

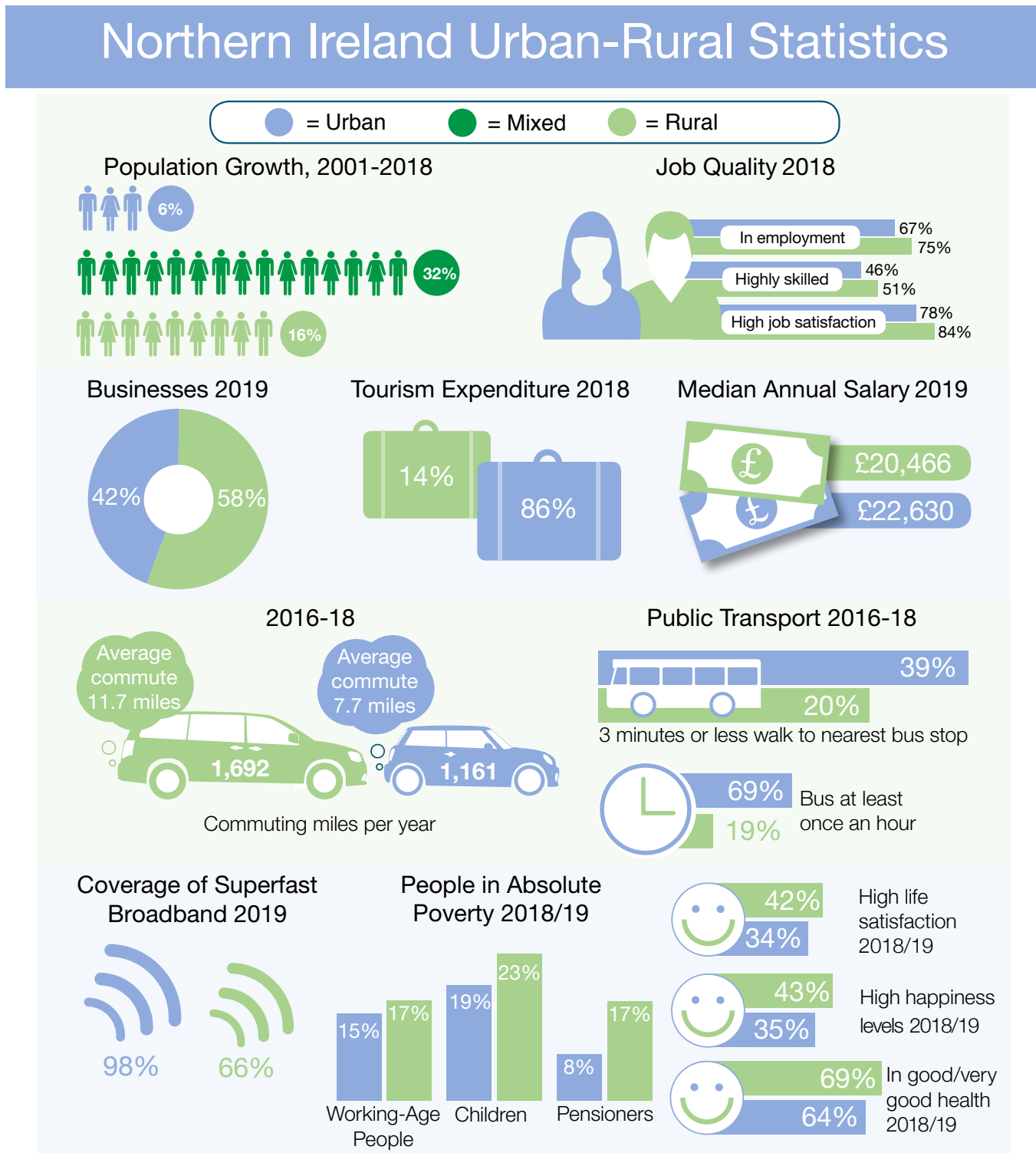


Figure 6: Taken from Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2020 report available at: [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic\\_0.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20Infographic_0.pdf)

The table below provides evidence of key issues affecting rural communities at a NI regional level. This evidence is being used to support equitable treatment of rural communities in policies and programmes across government.

### Key Findings - Issues Affecting Rural Communities in NI

- Over 80% of the NI land mass is rural and more than one in three of the population live in rural areas. Population growth in rural areas outstrips that in urban areas. Between 2001 and 2018 rural populations grew by 16% in comparison to 6% for urban areas.
- The adult populations of rural and urban areas are very similar in terms of educational achievement, but on average, young people from rural areas leave school with higher qualifications and are more likely to enter higher education than their urban peers. There are, however, intra-rural differences in qualifications and destinations of school leavers with those rural dwellers living more than an hour’s drive from Belfast less likely to have achieved degree level or higher qualifications (23%) than their urban counterparts (30%), and were more likely to have no formal qualification (25% compared to 18%).
- Rural people of working age are more likely to be in full-time employment, and less likely to be economically inactive than those living in towns and cities.
- In 2018, people living in rural areas were more likely to be in employment, with 74% employed either full or part-time. Similarly, this group was less likely to be economically inactive compared to those living in urban areas. Earnings levels for public sector workers are on average higher in urban than in rural areas, while for those in the private sector, salaries in rural and urban workplaces are very similar.

However, people working in rural areas more than an hour’s drive from Belfast have lowest average earnings of all, whether in the public or the private sector. In 2019, the median salary overall in rural areas was £20,466 compared to £22,630 in urban areas. Figure 7 shows the median salary according to urban and rural areas:

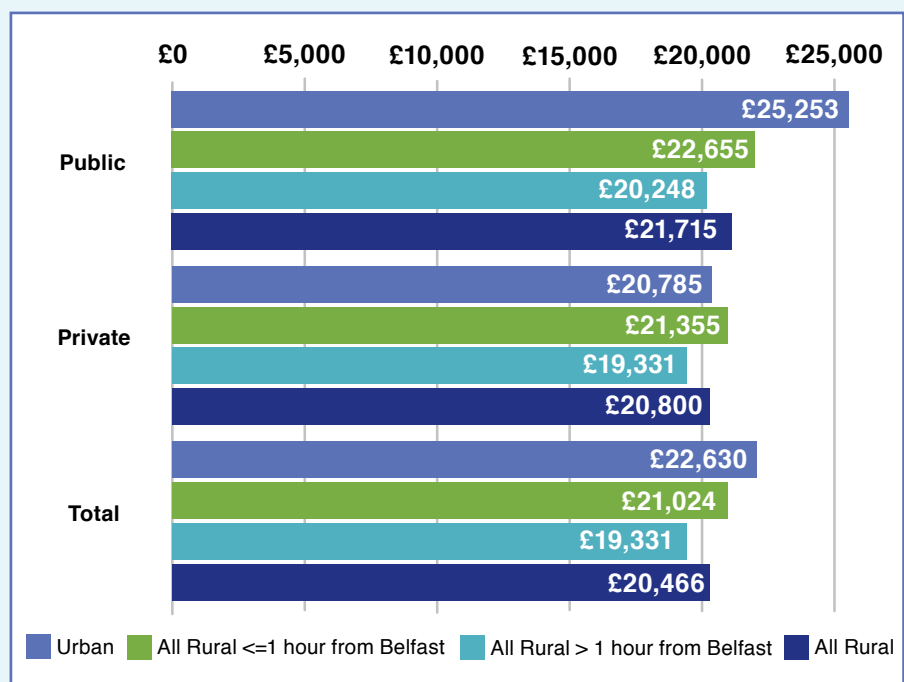


Figure 7: Median Annual Salary by Workplace Address/Sector, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2019 (Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) 2019, NISRA).

### Key Findings - Issues Affecting Rural Communities in NI

- Workers who live (but not necessarily work) in rural areas are on average more highly skilled and enjoy higher job satisfaction than those who live in towns and cities.
- Workers from rural areas have an average commute for almost one and a half times more than urban workers, and travel on average over 400 miles more annually to get to work. Rural workers (91%) are also far more likely to use private transport to commute than those from urban areas (74%).
- In 2020, more than half (58%) of all businesses in NI are located in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for only around a fifth of employees and roughly a quarter of total business turnover.
- The rural and urban economies also differ in terms of industry sector, with rural businesses predominantly engaged in agriculture, forestry, fishing, and construction, whereas urban businesses are more widely spread across a variety of sectors.
- Tourism is important in terms of employment and economic growth, but less than a fifth (18%) of all overnight tourism visits to NI and only 14% of associated expenditure take place in rural locations.
- Broadband speed and availability, though improving, are still much lower in rural than in urban areas. Access to public transport in rural areas is also much lower than that in towns and cities.
- Accessing key services is more difficult for the rural than the urban population. In some rural areas, services are simply inaccessible without private transport, and journey times to key services by car are on average twice as long for rural dwellers as for those living in towns and cities. The disparity in access is greater for those living in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast than those living closer to the city.
- People living in rural areas are consistently more likely than those in urban areas to rate their happiness and life satisfaction as high and their health as good.
- Life expectancy is much higher in rural areas and a number of indicators point to better overall mental and emotional wellbeing in the rural than the urban population. However, people living in rural areas on average wait much longer for emergency services than those living in towns and cities.
- People from rural locations are less likely to directly experience several crime types than those living in towns and cities. However, the number of recorded crimes with a racist, sectarian or homophobic motivation has increased in rural areas from 2018-19, despite a decline in urban areas.
- Similar proportions of urban and rural households are in relative or absolute poverty. Levels of poverty in households in rural areas distant from Belfast are higher than those of households in urban areas.

### Key Findings - Issues Affecting Rural Communities in NI

- Poverty levels in both children and adults of working age are very similar in urban and rural areas as a whole. However, the reverse is true for pensioners. Rural pensioners are nearly twice as likely to experience relative or absolute poverty as their urban counterparts. Figure 8 shows the proportion of individuals in poverty after housing costs for 2018/19:

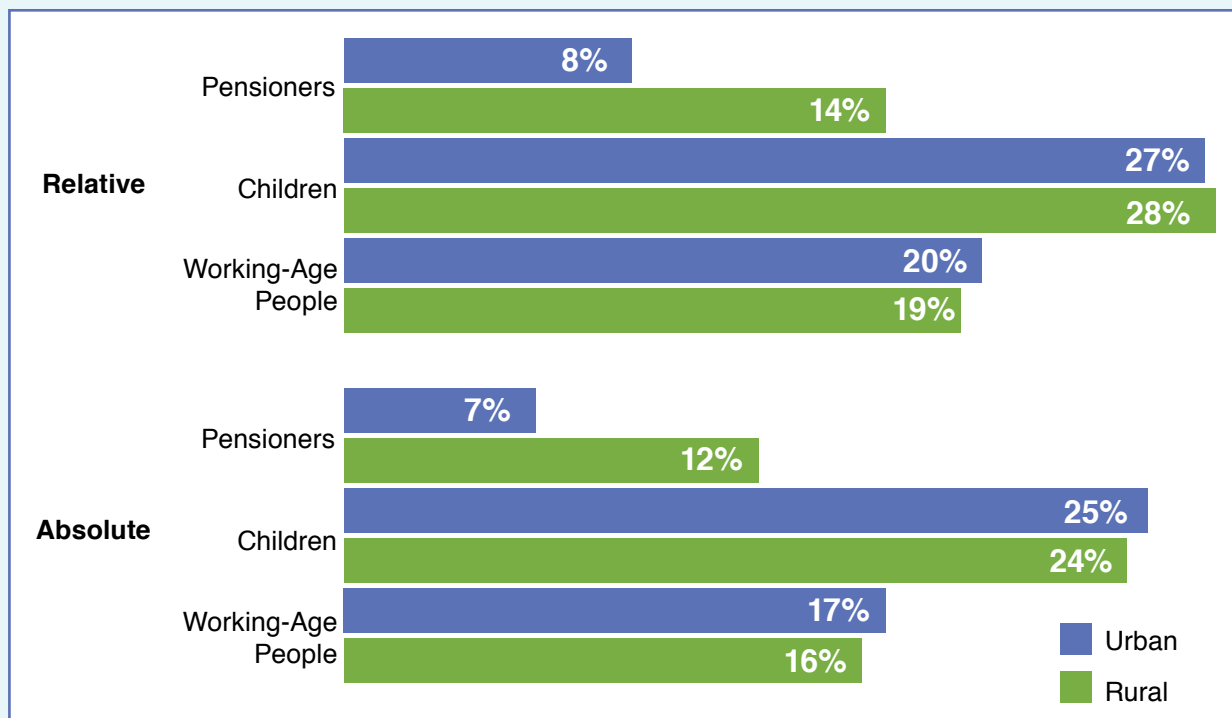


Figure 8: Proportion of Individuals in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018/19 (Source: Households Below Average Income (HBAI), Department for Communities (DfC), 2018/19)

- The cost of living is higher in rural areas. Private transport is often a necessity and car ownership and running costs may consume a greater share of available household income. Rural households are also twice as likely as urban households to be in fuel poverty (e.g. 32% of rural households compared to 16% of those in urban areas).
- Access to social housing is much more limited and levels of home ownership are much higher in rural (80%) than urban areas (63%). House prices in rural areas are on average higher than in towns and cities.

## Conclusion

Around 670,000 people live in rural areas in NI, and although their circumstances are in many ways very similar to those of urban dwellers, there are distinct urban/rural differences which tend to be more pronounced in rural areas distant from Belfast. Nevertheless, the rural population on average enjoy a better quality of life than town and city dwellers, in terms of health, happiness and life satisfaction.

In the next section we outline in some detail, the specific evidence gathered and stakeholder feedback received from each of the Working Groups across the five themes. Co-design principles were used throughout the development of each key theme with evidence of the emerging need in rural areas resulting in the development of Priority Interventions. Furthermore, where key themes were raised during the public consultation stage, this information has also been incorporated.



## Output from Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Working Group



### Introduction

The Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Working Group was tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: **'To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish'**. The research and evidence (see Annex 6 for more detailed information on the evidence base) along with the consultation and engagement played a key role in formulating three priority areas for intervention which feed into the thematic pillar.

Innovation is high on the UK policy agenda with a compelling rationale for investment in establishing and encouraging an environment conducive to innovation. Consideration needs to be given to how innovation is driven from within, in processes and thinking, as well as in the delivery of projects and programmes and in the type of enterprises and entrepreneurial activity supported. Rural entrepreneurship and innovation are also important vehicles for the delivery of the Draft Programme for Government, particularly in delivering a regionally balanced economy.

We would highlight that there is some degree of similarity between thematic pillars 1 and 4. Therefore, in order to avoid any potential overlap, pillar 4 focuses on the 'people' aspect (i.e. employees and addressing the barriers to employment). The next section sets the strategic context within NI for entrepreneurship and innovation.

### Strategic Context - Entrepreneurship and Innovation

The importance of entrepreneurship is widely recognised in NI economic policy as is the need for innovation in terms of driving competitiveness and growth, with the potential to contribute to social cohesion, act as a vehicle for personal development, and help resolve social issues.

The DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025 states that:

*'There is a compelling rationale for government to invest in establishing and encouraging an environment conducive to innovation. Investing in knowledge and innovation, including in research and innovation capacity, is vital for achieving inclusive economic growth, for the sustainability of the UK economy ... businesses that innovate grow nearly twice as quickly in both employment and turnover as non-innovators.'*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2014), Our plan for growth: Science and Innovation, Evidence Paper.

The strategy also recognises that there are a number of barriers to innovation including availability and cost of finance, leadership, technology, research and development and creative thinking skills, risk aversion, and lack of understanding of innovation.

NESTA in their study into 'Rural Innovation'<sup>11</sup> highlighted similarities between urban and rural businesses, however, concluded that it was important for business support providers to recognise the different context in which rural based businesses operate and the different challenges and opportunities they face. The study states that

*'Innovation in rural areas may be much wider than product innovation, and may incorporate new ways of living, travelling, working and collaborating.  
Rural innovation may be about different ways of working - perhaps using technology.'*

Entrepreneurship and innovation operate within a complex landscape with various sources of support available for entrepreneurs. Recognising the complexity of the landscape, it is important that DAERA consider opportunities to signpost to existing programmes/services where available and act as a key source of navigation for rural entrepreneurs.

Invest NI, as the economic development agency in NI, supports enterprise creation and development at a number of levels with a focus predominately on scaling up and export (those businesses demonstrating capacity to exceed £250k turnover and 25% exports).

The 'Go for It' programme delivered by local government provides individuals with business start-up advice and mentoring. It should be noted that there is no grant assistance included with this programme.

Opportunities should exist to design bespoke or tailored programmes, particularly at the lower end towards micro and small enterprises/businesses (new and existing), to address rural specific needs relating to groups, sectors or gaps. For example, targeted programmes on farm diversification; women in rural enterprise; rural youth entrepreneurship; rural social economy or in support of emerging/growth sectors where evidence supports this need and where there is currently little to no provision. The next section highlights some key statistics and findings in relation to innovation and entrepreneurship within NI.

<sup>11</sup> NESTA (The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, now known as the Innovation Foundation), Rural Innovation (2007).



## Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland - Key Findings

The table below highlights some key findings identified by the Working Group in relation to innovation and entrepreneurship in NI.

Category	Findings
<b>Entrepreneurship and Innovation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Levels of entrepreneurial activity are a vital sign of any economy. Research indicates that NI has historically lagged behind the rest of the UK in terms of enterprise start-up; level of innovative activity; and collaboration.</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship and innovation operate within a complex landscape, with a range of players offering predominately standardised products with a focus on scaling up and export (those businesses demonstrating capacity to exceed £250k turnover and 25% exports).</li> <li>• According to the GEM UK: Northern Ireland Report 2017 the Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) in NI in 2017 was 6.5% compared to the UK average of 8.7%. Those aged between 25-34 years old in NI were most entrepreneurial and females in NI were half as likely to be entrepreneurs as males. Opportunity also exists to tap into the entrepreneurial potential of 18-24-year olds. There is a need to make enterprise and entrepreneurship visible to the existing and potential talent pool in rural areas including graduates.</li> <li>• Within NI, the highest TEA rates are typically found in Mid Ulster District Council area while Derry &amp; Strabane have the lowest. Just under 30% of the non-entrepreneurial working age population perceive good start-up opportunities locally. The UK rate, which is almost 40%, continues to be significantly higher than that for NI.</li> <li>• Innovations and entrepreneurial accomplishments of rural women are imperative to the future progress and viability of rural areas. The Treasury commissioned '<i>Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship (2019)</i>' identified 3 areas of opportunities to help female entrepreneurs including: increasing the funding directed towards them; greater family care support; and making entrepreneurship more accessible to women and increasing support locally, through relatable and accessible mentors and networks. The government is aiming to increase the number of female entrepreneurs by half by 2030, equivalent to nearly 600,000 additional female entrepreneurs.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The DfE in its context paper ‘Entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland (2018)’ highlights: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ NI historically has a comparatively low business birth rate compared to the rest of the UK, with a 10.2% rate in 2016 compared to a 14.6% UK average<sup>12</sup>, but the rate is increasing steadily in recent years, with NI showing the greatest rate of growth over the last five years within the UK;</li> <li>~ The rate of business closure in NI was significantly lower than in England and the UK as a whole in 2017, with 1.0% of businesses closing in the last 12 months compared to 2.1% in the UK as a whole;<sup>13</sup></li> <li>~ The proportion of non-entrepreneurs who thought they had skills to start a business was significantly lower in NI with 31.9% compared to 40.6% in the UK. Those expressing their intention to start a business was much lower at 5.1% compared to a 9.3% UK average;<sup>14</sup> and</li> <li>~ NI has a lower proportion of innovation-active businesses with 40.3% of firms from NI actively engaged in innovation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Social Economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Social Enterprise Northern Ireland ‘Rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy Report (2019)’ provided a comprehensive survey of the social enterprise sector in NI showing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Social economy is worth £625 million to the economy. The employment base has grown from 12,200 in 2013 to 24,860 in 2018 and equivalent growth in turnover has increased from £592.7 million to £980 million in 2018; and</li> <li>~ 53% of social enterprises employ half their workforce from their immediate locality. Social enterprise activity is predominately concentrated in urban centres, the North East and North West, with the number of organisations significantly lower in the West (Fermanagh &amp; Tyrone) and East (Down). When compared 53% of social enterprises are in Belfast, Antrim has 16%, Armagh 11%, Derry/Londonderry 13%, Down 3%, Fermanagh 1% and Tyrone 3%.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

12 Business Demography UK, ONS, 2016.

13 GEM UK 2017 Monitoring Report, July 2018.

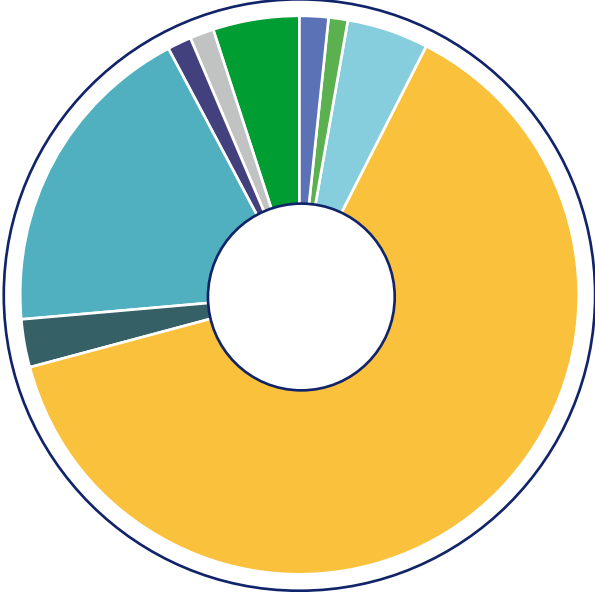
14 GEM UK 2017 Monitoring Report, July 2018.

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A report commissioned by Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (now DAERA) in 2016<sup>15</sup> in relation to the scope and potential of social enterprises in rural areas highlighted:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ The main identified constraints on the sector were lack of available finance, lack of awareness and support, staffing (skilled and voluntary) and business planning strategies and skills. Organisations also suggested that the role and potential contribution of social enterprises was not well understood at both a government and wider community level. This was especially true in relation to the challenges that rurality, characterised by low population densities and isolated rural communities, can bring in terms of the cost of delivering services in rural areas; and</li> <li>~ Four areas where rural social enterprises could be supported include: recruiting and retaining volunteers; awareness, promotion and marketing of the sector; willingness to collaborate; and funding mechanisms.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Businesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are more businesses located in rural areas of NI than in urban areas. The Inter-Departmental Business Register (April 2019) shows the total number of businesses in NI to be 74,060<sup>16</sup> of which 43,000 are located in rural areas (58%). However, turnover in rural areas is considerably less and accounts for only 25% of the NI turnover.</li> <li>• Micro and small businesses are particularly dominant in rural areas with 94% of rural businesses are considered micro (i.e. businesses with less than 10 employees). Queens University and the Enterprise Research Centre in their study of 'Understanding Micro Businesses in Northern Ireland (2018)' identified 28,500 micro businesses in NI employing 111,000 people (19.7% of workforce). The research also showed:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ In 2017, micro enterprises surveyed generated sales of £10.4bn (17.2% of all NI firms);</li> <li>~ Family ownership is more important in NI than elsewhere in the UK with 78% of micro businesses family owned. 54% of micro business owners placed a high priority on building a business to hand on to family;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>15</sup> DARD Commissioned E&I Programme 'The impact of low-income and poverty on the wellbeing of rural households and the role and scope of social enterprises in delivering solutions' Project Number 13/02/01 AFBI Claire Jack; Duncan Anderson.

<sup>16</sup> Total of all businesses including micro (0-9), small (10-49), medium/large 50+, Inter-Department Business Register, April 2019.

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ On average 10% of micro business sales are from export markets. 20% have ambitions to build nationally/internationally; and</li> <li>~ The level of innovative activity in NI was the lowest of any UK region with 13% of innovating firms in NI compared to 23% in the UK as a whole.</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability and stability of businesses is very important in a rural context. Support needs to cater for existing businesses (with a focus on efficiency, improving productivity, profitability, modernisation, succession &amp; next generation growth &amp; development). It also needs to accelerate the growth potential of ambitious rural businesses &amp; encourage new business start-ups (particularly within groups or sectors lagging behind or where opportunity for innovation exists).</li> <li>• More rural businesses are owned by people for whom export is not the main driver. However, critical mass is important, given the small populations and higher transportation costs etc. There should be opportunities to create a critical mass of 'buyers' and 'suppliers' in rural areas.</li> <li>• <b>Rural Business Investment Scheme 2014-2020</b> - an analysis of this scheme which falls within Priority 6 was carried out in January 2020. The Scheme aims to assist new and existing rural businesses to become sustainable and to grow and is open to micro and small businesses offering grant aid from a minimum of £5,000 up to a maximum of £90,000 at 50% of eligible expenditure. The scheme provided the only opportunity for rural businesses to access grant aid. The findings are consistent with wider research particularly in highlighting a disparity between male and female entrepreneurs; a high demand for support from existing businesses and lower levels of youth, social enterprise and farm diversification engagement. The review showed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ A total of 480 business supported with the most frequent award in and around £30,000;</li> <li>~ Of the businesses successful in securing grant aid assistance, 84% were located off-farm with 16% considered on-farm;</li> <li>~ 64% of businesses were classified as micro with 36% considered small;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Category	Findings																				
	<p>~ The chart below shows the Breakdown of Business Themes supported under the Rural Business Investment Scheme. Manufacturing represented the highest percentage in terms of business theme at 55% of all businesses supported:</p> <div data-bbox="496 533 1399 1518" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><b>Chart: Breakdown of Business Themes - RDP 2014-2020</b></p>  <table border="1" data-bbox="587 1249 1321 1496"> <thead> <tr> <th>Theme</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Childcare</td> <td>~2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Craft</td> <td>~5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>E-commerce/ICT</td> <td>~5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Manufacturing</td> <td>55%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>~2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Services</td> <td>~15%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist - Accommodation</td> <td>~2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist - Hospitality</td> <td>~2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist - Leisure/Activity</td> <td>~10%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> </div> <p>~ 83% of businesses supported were existing, 15% new and 2% social enterprise;</p> <p>~ A total of 764 Full Time jobs and 159 Part Time jobs have been created to date through the scheme.</p> <p>~ In relation to gender and age, males benefitted most from the scheme with 76% of beneficiaries identified as male and 24% female. Of those, male and female beneficiaries, the highest percentage were over 40 years old with 230 male beneficiaries over 40 and 79 female beneficiaries. This is in stark contrast to beneficiaries under 25 years old with only 3 recorded.</p>	Theme	Percentage	Childcare	~2%	Craft	~5%	E-commerce/ICT	~5%	Manufacturing	55%	Other	~2%	Services	~15%	Tourist - Accommodation	~2%	Tourist - Hospitality	~2%	Tourist - Leisure/Activity	~10%
Theme	Percentage																				
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Tourist - Leisure/Activity	~10%																				

Category	Findings
<p><b>Farm Diversification</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government figures for 2018/2019 showed a fall in farm incomes. On average they fell by 23% with only cereal business showing a slight increase. The average income in 2018/2019 was just over £26,000, a drop of £7,800 on the previous year. Although agriculture remains the anchor of many rural communities, falling farm incomes require new thinking around farm assets and resources.</li> <li>• The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in 2015 found that the incidence of farm diversification in 2010 was considerably lower in NI (5%) than was the case in England (18%).</li> <li>• A 2019 study carried out by AFBI<sup>17</sup> has shown that there is a range of farm diversification strategies being pursued in NI. The primary motivating factor in pursuing farm-level diversification is the need to generate a new income source. However, factors such as resource availability, succession and funding also are important influences. Farm level diversification contributes to both sustainability of family farms and to the wider rural economy. Activities seen as having potential opportunity for growth include: agri and food tourism, care services (including social farming) and professional services.</li> <li>• The main factors identified as constraints to diversification were broadband, planning, business rates, a lack of support networks and a fear of failure.</li> <li>• The AFBI study identified 7 key policy recommendations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Farm diversification businesses tend to fall into the category of 'micro-businesses', involving mainly the farm owner and/or some family members. There is a need to explore how support can be provided to these prospective businesses in a less bureaucratic way. This could include softer support mechanisms other than financial grants such as developing 'softer' business skills through training;</li> <li>~ Government targets around job creation and turnover were perceived as too narrow and not appropriate metrics to evaluate successful farm diversification programmes. A project's contribution may be better measured through the additional income it provides for the farm business and its contribution it makes to farm and household sustainability. This requires consideration from a policy</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>17</sup> Encouraging entrepreneurship, business innovation and diversification at farm level in Northern Ireland, Conall Mullan, Claire Jack, Austen Ashfield, Adewale Henry Adenuga, AFBI 2019, project 16/2/02 under Policy Lead, Mr Niall Heaney.

Category	Findings
	<p>perspective in terms of how support is allocated and what metrics are used to assess the success of funded projects;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ A more joined-up approach to developing rural programmes around farm diversification and developing entrepreneurship is required with greater collaboration between government departments, policy development and delivery. DAERA should provide a 'championing' and coordinating role but there needs to be a wider involvement of other government departments and agencies;</li> <li>~ Policymakers should consider whether dedicated support should be provided to farm families in devising strategies for diversification. The availability of guidance around diversification, specifically for farm families should help to ensure the development of sustainable diversification businesses which will contribute to the local rural economy;</li> <li>~ Rural broadband connectivity needs to be improved to help with the promotion, visibility and running of on farm diversification projects;</li> <li>~ There is a need to provide short courses in a range of business-related areas through the correct learning mechanisms. Training and mentoring support should extend beyond the initial project start-up period; and</li> <li>~ There should be greater promotion of exemplar diversification businesses to encourage peer to peer knowledge exchange and increase the visibility of successful diversification projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural areas are lagging behind in terms of tourism expenditure. An opportunity exists to focus on place-based product development and innovations that add to visitor experiences e.g. emergence of food tourism experiences and how the rural sector can deliver, innovate and capitalise on this.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
<b>Connectivity, Infrastructure &amp; Planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The following all impact negatively on rural business development and competitiveness:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Poor transport infrastructure;</li> <li>~ Broadband speeds and connectivity;</li> <li>~ Costs of transportation and communications;</li> <li>~ Lack of skilled labour;</li> <li>~ Planning policies;</li> <li>~ Lack of similar firms to network with and localised business network opportunities; and</li> <li>~ Limited access to local skills and training.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Training, capacity and capability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capability, capacity and skills development are as important as capital grant and should be seen as key enablers in support of enterprise and entrepreneurship development and growth.</li> </ul>

The next section outlines in detail, how the Working Group developed the priority interventions under the rural innovation and entrepreneurship thematic pillar.

## Development of the Priority Interventions

The Working Group interventions are framed within the context of three key elements: Champion; Empower and Enable to ensure successful delivery of the thematic pillar. Each element is interrelated and interdependent and may be packaged collectively as a 'wrap around programme' with the champion and empower elements identified as essential precursors to any enabling investment particularly for new businesses. Each element is outlined in more detail below:

- **Champion** - built on leadership principles, norms, work habits and vision, mission and values, this element is designed to improve the motivation to prioritise rural innovation and entrepreneurship. There is a need to work together with others both inside and outside government, to pool resources, ideas and innovations to maximise the opportunities for rural and to deliver better, more connected outcomes for rural dwellers.
- **Empower** - focused on building the capacity and capability of people to engage in rural innovation and entrepreneurship. This could involve maximising opportunities whether in industry, business, local development or volunteering in communities.



- **Enable** - focused on providing financial support (Grant Aid) to improve the opportunities for rural innovation and entrepreneurship. This is a commitment to action and provide support to take forward practical projects and programmes that will make a difference to the everyday lives of rural people.

The following priority interventions have therefore 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.

The diagram below demonstrates how the three interventions are interrelated and interdependent.



## Stakeholder Engagement (pre-consultation)

A stakeholder event was held in January 2020 to review engagement findings across all five policy working groups. Overall the feedback was positive, with the proposed thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention endorsed on the day. In regards to each thematic pillar, the stakeholders were asked their views on what they agreed with; and what needed changed or was missing. The feedback received in relation to the rural innovation and entrepreneurship thematic pillar from the public rural stakeholder engagement event held in January 2020 is summarised below (detailed feedback received on the day is available in Annex 7):

- The need for wraparound support (animation, training and development, mentoring) and grant aid featured prominently;
- Whilst it was noted there was a need to support social enterprises in rural areas, respondents highlighted more was required in terms of promotion and awareness raising in relation to the social enterprise model in rural areas with many organisations not realising that they were in fact a social enterprise;
- The potential for farm diversification featured particularly in a post EU RDP environment;
- There was general acceptance of a need to support new business start-ups and existing businesses and an acknowledgement of a need to support sustainability and stability and to reduce the emphasis on job creation as a measurement of success;
- There was a need identified to encourage better connections and linkages both internally across government and externally with colleges, universities and to encourage businesses to network and cluster;
- Focus on innovation was welcomed and a need for it to be applied to the whole approach. Linked to this was the opportunity to share practice and learn from other regions;
- Improved connectivity, infrastructure and planning policies were considered key requirements to the successful attainment of the thematic pillar;
- Stakeholders indicated there was a high degree of similarity between thematic pillars 1 and 4 and that greater distinction may be needed to avoid any potential overlap. It was suggested that thematic pillar 4 should focus more on the 'people' aspect (employee side) addressing, for example, the barriers to employment; and
- There were a number of comments for DAERA in relation to the simplification of regulations. These will require further consideration when developing operating procedures for any new schemes or programmes that may arise.

The next section outlines some potential implications that have since been identified due to COVID-19.

## Potential Implications of COVID-19

The Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Working Group presented their evidence and findings prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To ensure that the Rural Policy Framework accurately reflects need, Working Group Members were asked in May 2020 to advise if there were any impacts on priorities previously identified or emerging issues that may need to be taken into account.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship were highlighted as follows:

- The Priority Interventions are more valid than ever in helping and supporting the rural economy to get back on its feet. In the short to medium term, a focus may need to be on recovery rather than growth. There is also a need to focus on the micro-enterprise sector.
- Remote working and digitalisation will likely become more prominent. There is a strong sense of opportunity now for rural communities with a realisation that people can work from anywhere, that local shops and services are essential and that community facilities/assets are hugely significant for rural areas.
- Social interaction and innovation remains important, particularly for young people. There is an opportunity to combine remote working, employment, enterprise opportunities in rural areas with community facilities and to create more accessible community hubs in rural areas with access to broadband.

Feedback outlined above indicated that no changes are required to the high-level priority interventions given that the interventions are broad enough to incorporate the issues identified above.

## Public Consultation Respondent Views

In addition to the information already identified, respondents to the 2021 public consultation noted the following in relation to Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship:

- Rural communities tend to be endemically innovative, therefore the support for innovation is crucial, rather than the need to foster innovation in the first place.
- A need to invest in green infrastructure with direct linkages between the economy and the natural environment was highlighted.
- 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.

## Linkages to Programme for Government Outcomes

Entrepreneurship and innovation contribute to at least four of the twelve Programme for Government outcomes as follows:

- **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; and
- **Outcome 6:** We have more people working in better jobs.

We believe that entrepreneurship and innovation links into the Programme for Government Outcomes outlined above as follows:

- These outcomes set out actions to increase the number of new businesses and encourage entrepreneurial activity, placing emphasis on increasing the number of new business start-ups and growing the size of existing businesses;
- These outcomes are about building a society and an economy which is renowned for its innovation and creativity and admired for the opportunities afforded to people of all backgrounds to fulfil their potential. Innovation drives productivity and economic growth as companies that innovate and collaborate are more productive, more inclined to export and employ more highly qualified people than those that do not;
- To prosper in a global economy, our social, economic and cultural assets need to work together to foster greater creativity, innovation and inclusiveness and to create an environment where arts and culture can flourish as part of an ever more innovative, creative society; and
- Digital technology has become a driving force across all aspects of our social, cultural and economic lives and research has identified a growing need to ensure that everyone has the digital skills needed to benefit from new technology and to remain safe online.

## Conclusion

Levels of entrepreneurial activity are a vital sign of any economy. There are some very real differences in the characteristics of businesses located in urban and rural areas. Micro and small businesses are particularly dominant in rural economies. This thematic pillar recognises the future success of the rural economy is inextricably linked to the capacity of rural businesses to innovate, to identify new opportunities that develop, strengthen and grow our rural economy. It should be noted that there is a distinction between innovative business and supporting businesses to innovate (with the latter offering greater opportunity to engage businesses in the process of innovation maximising longer-term impact).

## Output from Rural Tourism Working Group



### Introduction

The Rural Tourism Working Group was tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: ***‘To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment’***. The research and evidence (see Annex 8 for more detailed information on the evidence base) along with the consultation and engagement played a key role in formulating four priority areas for intervention which feed into the thematic pillar.

The benefits and positive impacts of tourism are not limited to revenue and job creation. Development of the sector and its component parts, hotels, restaurants, visitor attractions, and infrastructure, benefit not only tourists but also local communities, creating better environments in which to work, live and play. Furthermore, when developed and managed properly, tourism has the capacity to cultivate and showcase local history, culture and natural and built heritage, and engenders a sense of community, togetherness and pride. The focus of this Working Group was on sustainable rural tourism, which is defined in more detail in the next section.

### What is “Sustainable Tourism”?

A fundamental relationship that exists between the environment and tourism. The environment, natural or built, is the most fundamental ingredient for tourism development yet it is highly dependent on the availability and the type of attractive natural and/or built resources in an area, which tourists demand and pay for. However, the increasing amount of tourism development often erodes the environmental resources on which it depends.

On the other hand, tourism has the potential to create beneficial effects on the environment by contributing to environmental protection and conservation. It is a way to raise awareness of environmental values and it can serve as a tool to finance protection of natural areas and increase their economic importance. In order to prevent these haphazard development and negative impacts, tourism needs to be ecologically acceptable in the long term, and financially viable and fair from a social and ethical point of view for local communities. In other words, it must be sustainable.

This Framework’s thematic pillar on sustainable rural tourism, uses the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) definition on sustainable tourism as follows: *‘Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities’*.

The vision for tourism in NI is:

- Renowned as a world-class short break destination;
- With a skilled, competitive and committed industry;
- Working with government for the long-term success of tourism; and
- Focused on fostering high growth, high quality indigenous businesses.

### Northern Ireland - Embrace a Giant Spirit

In November 2019 a new tourism destination brand for Northern Ireland was launched at World Travel Market London, that is now used to promote Northern Ireland on the island of Ireland and internationally, with the aim of increasing visitor numbers and ensuring economic impact across all regions. Northern Ireland - Embrace a Giant Spirit will communicate a high-quality experience to visitors that is recognisable as distinctively Northern Irish.

The next section provides some key findings relevant to tourism within Northern Ireland.



## Tourism in Northern Ireland - Key Findings

Whilst NI is still a relatively new, emerging destination and lags behind the other nations in the UK in terms of tourism's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and overseas visitor spend per night, the opportunity for growth is significant with the NI tourism sector developing with pace in recent years. In particular, since 2012 overnight trips to NI increased by over one fifth, and associated spend grew to over £1 billion in 2019. The table below highlights some key findings identified by the Working Group in relation to the Tourism Industry in NI. These findings were identified in early 2020, pre-COVID-19, therefore where feasible we have updated statistics using the most recent information available to us.

Category	Findings <sup>18</sup>
<b>NI Tourism Market</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Northern Ireland Urban Rural Statistics produced by DAERA<sup>19</sup> shows total tourism expenditure in 2018 in rural areas was 14% in comparison to 86% in urban areas.</li> <li>• Tourism NI data confirmed that 59% of all visitor tourism expenditure in 2018 in NI was concentrated in Belfast and Causeway, Coast and Glens.</li> </ul>

<sup>18</sup> Information sourced from Northern Ireland Annual Tourism Statistics 2018 (Published 6 June 2019, NISRA) and NI tourism performance data (January-March 2019) released by NISRA

<sup>19</sup> Available at: [www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-rural-urban-statistics](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-rural-urban-statistics)

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2019 the Giant’s Causeway remained NI’s number one visitor attraction, welcoming 1 million visitors.</li> <li>• Tourism NI’s visitor survey (2018) highlights: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Strong endorsement of the overall NI experience with attractions and activities on offer across NI, however, there is still a lack of a ‘sense of place’ and a wider tourism offer;</li> <li>~ 60% of respondents indicated that NI provides enough to do for a weekend or less, however, there was still a lack of night-time and Sunday experiences; and</li> <li>~ There was room for a wider food and drink offer.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Feedback from the Tourism Ireland’s market reviews suggested a need for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ New, compelling projects unique to NI;</li> <li>~ Experiences that are authentic, connect people with place, drawing on the heritage and landscape;</li> <li>~ Regional and seasonal experiences;</li> <li>~ Better integration and connectivity between experiences including food experiences;</li> <li>~ Better orientation and navigation to attractions; and</li> <li>~ Authentic NI including living historical experiences; hidden gems; and nature experiences/adventure activities. These experiences should be open to all.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The Anholt Ipsos Nation Brands Index (SM): 2019 report for Northern Ireland indicated that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ NI’s international reputation remains stable, achieving a mid-level ranking of 22 out of 50 nations with a score of 59.38 on the Nation Brands Index<sup>SM</sup>;</li> <li>~ The attribute with the highest score was “Natural beauty” with “Sports” receiving the lowest score; and</li> <li>~ Visiting or digital exposure to NI (through buying NI products/visiting websites) was associated with significantly higher scores.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• There is a lack of public transport from NI airports; on Sundays; with regular connections to/between rural areas. Many of the main tourist attractions also do not have public transport near them.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
<b>Overnight Trips</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One third of all overnight trips taken in NI in 2019 were enjoyed during the peak season (July - September).</li> <li>• During 2019 there were an estimated 5.3 million overnight trips in NI of which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ 2.3 million were internal visitors;</li> <li>~ 1.5 million visitors were from GB;</li> <li>~ 0.8 million visitors were from people outside the UK and Ireland; and</li> <li>~ 0.8 million visitors were from Republic of Ireland (RoI).</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>The total expenditure associated with these trips was £1bn. This was a record breaking spend and was 8% more when compared to 2018. On average there was spend of £2.9m each day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research in the GB market, the Tourism NI Visitor Survey 2019 and NISRA statistics all suggest that out of state visitors typically spend 4-5 days in NI. The average length of stay of domestic and RoI visitors is somewhat shorter at between two and three days.</li> <li>• In 2019 when compared to 2018, nights increased by 2%, driven by significant increases in RoI nights (+23%), as well as growth from NI (+5%).</li> <li>• The two main reasons to take an overnight trip in Northern Ireland are 'holiday/pleasure/leisure' and 'visiting friends or relatives'. Research undertaken by Tourism NI demonstrates the principle reasons for people visiting NI are to explore our culture, heritage and landscape. There was a 14% increase in holiday visitors when compared to 2018.</li> </ul>
<b>Out of State Visitors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 'out of state' markets of RoI, GB, France, Germany, USA and Australia and the emerging Chinese market have been identified as critical to the continued success and growth of NI tourism.</li> <li>• In order to attract more of the right type of visitors and grow NI's tourism economy, Fáilte Ireland has developed an overseas segmentation model focused on understanding visitor motivations and needs. The three segments with the strongest potential for RoI and NI are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Culturally Curious - want to soak up authentic insights into new cultures, art, history and landscapes which are different;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Social Energisers - want fun-packed social adventures and new experiences; and</li> <li>~ Great Escapers - want time out from busy lives to reconnect with each other, sharing quality down time, off the beaten track.</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition to leisure tourism there are a number of further niche market opportunities for NI including Business, Golf and Screen and Cruise tourism. For example, a total of 167 cruise ships docked at NI ports in 2019. This was an increase compared to 128 cruise ships in 2018 and a marked increase from 62 cruise ships in 2013.</li> </ul>
<b>Hotel Room Occupancy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2019, an estimated 2.3 million hotel room nights were sold in NI with hotel room occupancy estimated to be 67%.</li> <li>• Guest house/guest accommodation/B&amp;Bs delivered a strong performance throughout 2019 with an additional 41,200 bed-spaces sold compared to the same period in 2018. However, average room and bed-space occupancy recorded decreased, probably affected by the increase in additional rooms to fill compared with 2018.</li> </ul>
<b>Employment in tourism related industries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were 70,803 employee jobs in tourism related industries in 2019. By the nature of the sector these jobs have been generated both in urban and rural areas of NI.</li> </ul>
<b>Visitor Attractions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NISRA runs an annual survey to collect information on visits to all visitor attractions in Northern Ireland. The key findings in December 2018 were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ The top three attractions (excluding parks &amp; gardens) were Giant's Causeway, Titanic Belfast and Ulster Museum. There was an increase of 5% of visits from the previous year to Giant's Causeway and Titanic Belfast;</li> <li>~ There were a reported 21.1 million visits to visitor attractions;</li> <li>~ A reported 40% of visits were made by visitors who lived outside of NI; and</li> <li>~ Country Parks/Parks/Forests accounted for 42% of all visitors reported.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Category	Findings
<b>Managing impact of tourism on built, natural and cultural heritage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tourism needs to be developed in the right place and in the right way. This can be done by ensuring that development sites carrying capacity will not be exceeded in terms of both physical and perceptual carrying capacity.</li> <li>• Development should not be to the detriment of any individual or community but should bring positive benefits and become an asset to the community.</li> <li>• Development should not de-value landscapes - development should fit within the landscape and not be imposed on it.</li> </ul>

The next section outlines in detail, how the Working Group developed the priority interventions under the sustainable tourism thematic pillar.

## Development of the Priority Interventions

The Working Group interventions are framed within the internationally recognised visitors, industry, community, and environment (VICE) model (as set out in Figure 8 below) which identifies sustainable tourism as the interaction between visitors, the industry that provides services to them, the community and culture that hosts them and their collective impact on and response to the environment where it all takes place.



Figure 8: New Zealand Ministry of Tourism et al. (2006)

A successful, sustainable tourism industry needs to identify how to:

- Welcome, involve and satisfy **Visitors**
- Achieve a profitable and prosperous **Industry**
- Engage and benefit host **Communities**
- Protect and enhance the local **Environment**

The following priority interventions have therefore 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.

## Stakeholder Engagement (pre-consultation)

A stakeholder event was held in January 2020 to review engagement findings across all five policy working groups. Overall the feedback was positive, with the proposed thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention endorsed on the day. In regards to each thematic pillar, the stakeholders were asked their views on what they agreed with; and what needed changed or was missing. The feedback received in relation to the rural tourism thematic pillar from the public rural stakeholder engagement event held in January 2020 is summarised below (detailed feedback received on the day is available in Annex 9):

- Tourism should be sustainable, ensuring protection of the environment and possible minimisation of carbon footprint issues whilst enabling appropriate infrastructure linkages between urban and rural areas to facilitate tourists. There is potential to explore the

activity and environmental tourism market, which allows the use of natural assets whilst promoting local health and wellbeing initiatives. This would allow rural communities to also benefit from the tourism product;

- Tourism opportunities such as co-ordination around food/crafts etc. should be considered. Whilst a limited number of “signature projects” are important, there is also an opportunity to maintain and develop local attractions (for locals in the off-season) but with enough to attract out of state visitors in holiday season;
- Partnership working with local communities is needed to ensure a bottom up approach whereby any tourist attraction will benefit the local rural community. There also needs to be a joined up inter-departmental and local government approach to tourism with a link to Community Plans;
- There is a shortage in skills sets (e.g. skilled waiters). Capacity needs to be built up and significant support provided to those in rural areas;
- Planning policies can make rural tourism difficult; and
- A cultural shift is needed by working with local rural communities to embrace tourists and tourism and understand the target audience. In order to make NI more prominent for global visitors, there needs to be a joined up approach between Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI. Market research and branding is important to understand the visitor profile and year round local marketing should be maximised.

The next section outlines some potential implications that have since been identified due to COVID-19.

## Potential Implications of COVID-19

The Rural Tourism Working Group presented their evidence and findings prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To ensure that the Rural Policy Framework accurately reflects need, Working Group Members were asked in May 2020 to advise if there were any impacts on priorities previously identified or emerging issues that may need to be taken into account.

The impacts of COVID-19 will have a major impact on Rural Tourism going forward:

- Businesses are in uncertain times both financially and operationally. Assistance will be required for local businesses to re-establish post COVID-19. For example, businesses need to be able to meet any health and safety regulations and may also be negatively impacted by travel and quarantine restrictions.

- Out of state visitors will likely be significantly reduced in numbers for a number of years. The focus in the immediate short-term needs to be on the domestic, ROI and UK market and community based tourism to generate rural areas through tourism.
- The outdoors and adventure and activities sectors will be popular in the early months and years as visitors may be reluctant to spend large amounts of time indoors due to perceived safety and restrictions. The rural economy will be well placed to offer this visitor experience.
- Tourism NI highlighted that the tourism sector in NI closed down almost overnight and that it will be challenging for tourism businesses to develop or recover post COVID-19. Tourism NI set up a Contact Centre to support tourism businesses as well as a dedicated microsite. The contact centre had received calls and contact from over 700 businesses by the end of May 2020. Additionally, Tourism NI undertook an industry survey with 1,300 businesses responding with the following findings:
  - ~ 79% of businesses stated that COVID-19 would have a severe impact on their business in the short term (0-3 months) and 63% stated it would be severe in the longer term (4 months +);
  - ~ Tourism NI have been developing a Market Review of the NI Domestic Market. This will become increasingly important due to international travel restrictions, impact on international flights, lack of confidence of consumers etc.;
  - ~ The NI, ROI and GB markets, in turn, will be key in the short to medium term. Families will feature highly as a high spending segment among others. In 2019, UK and Ireland represented 76% of visitor spend in NI.
  - ~ Whilst a moving target, it is estimated that it will take at least 5 years for NI tourism performance to return to 2019 levels;
  - ~ Tourism NI is working on a 'Tourism Model' to help set goals and objectives and forecast visitor and spend levels and which will review historic attraction and accommodation numbers, tourism trends, other economic data etc.;
  - ~ Tourism NI will lead a rallying call for NI residents to support the local tourism and hospitality businesses and key success factors will include the attractiveness of our town and villages, the evening economy, appealing visitor experiences;
  - ~ Investment interventions will be required to help businesses 'reset' when returning to a 'new normal'. In some cases COVID-19 proof measures will need to be implemented such as visitor management, interpretation and signage, strict hygiene

regimes, advance booking online booking systems, business and staff development, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality and so on;

- ~ It is anticipated that many tourism businesses will not survive the impact of Covid-19 adding to the levels of unemployment and reduced levels of spend in the local economy;
- ~ The Embrace a Giant Spirit experience brand will be ever more important to gel the tourism industry together and give NI stand out. Tourism NI is working on a new domestic marketing campaign;
- ~ The tourism industry must become an increasingly agile, resilient and dynamic industry to compete with ever more competitive world-wide tourist destinations; and
- ~ Tourism NI is working collaboratively with councils and other tourism bodies to help to co-create solutions and programmes to ensure that they utilise existing limited resources to the greatest effect. Councils, Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF), Hospitality Ulster, local tourism agencies etc. are offering business support services including webinars, 1-1 mentoring, digital marketing programmes, signposting to government support and finance among other services.

In addition, the Tourism Performance Report for 2019, Tourism NI indicated that industry feedback suggested a positive start to 2020, pre-COVID-19. Accommodation and airport statistics clearly show the devastating impact the pandemic had during the first lockdown, and the reopening period.

Feedback outlined above indicated that no changes are required to the high level priority interventions given interventions 2 and 3 facilitate the focus on tourism at local and regional levels in terms of the local domestic market; and also community based tourism to generate rural areas through tourism. The next section outlines some of the work taking place to assist in recovery post COVID-19.

### **Recovery Work - Post COVID-19**

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, tourism accounted for approximately 65,000 jobs (almost 10% of all jobs) in NI's economy. The industry also generated around £1 billion in visitor spend in 2019. However, tourism businesses rely on visitors (domestic and out of state) for revenue. COVID-19 has resulted in the total removal of our industry's source of revenue for 2020. The crisis is exacerbated by the seasonal nature of the NI tourism offer and comes at the end of the low season when the cash reserves of tourism businesses are at their lowest, and the spring and summer seasons in which the industry does 70% of its business.

In regards to recovery work post COVID-19, DfE have established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group with membership drawn from the private and public sectors (central and local Government) to lead in the planning and preparations for the recovery of the NI Tourism Industry in response to COVID-19. A number of Tourism Recovery Task and Finish Groups have also been established. The Department recognises the need for physical regeneration of towns and villages and is engaging fully with the High Street Task Force to ensure there is a rural dimension to the recovery of Northern Ireland's high streets.

## Public Consultation Respondent Views

In addition to the information already identified, respondents to the 2021 public consultation noted the following in relation to Rural Tourism:

- For tourism to be sustainable, there is a need for a focus on rural employment and also to disperse visitors to rural locations from the main destinations of North Coast and Belfast.
- Responding to climate change must be at the heart of any sustainable tourism. Suggestions were 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.
- There is also a need for effective broadband/mobile phone connectivity to enable the promotion/marketing and booking of tourism services.
- It was suggested that derelict buildings should be brought back into use and that the current planning regulations made it difficult with many buying second homes in tourist areas and outpricing locals.
- Issues were raised in relation to public rights of way, particularly for landowners with trespassing on private land.
- 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.
- There is a need to build capacity of rural communities to establish, sustain and grow rural businesses.

## Linkages to Programme for Government Outcomes

The PfG recognises that tourism will be increasingly central to NI's economic and social wellbeing - driving export earnings for the economy, contributing to balanced sub-regional growth and job creation. Sustainable Rural Tourism can make a meaningful contribution to the following PfG outcomes:

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

We believe that sustainable tourism links into the Programme for Government Outcomes outlined above as follows:

- A strong, regionally balanced economy is essential if we are to tackle the social and economic challenges facing us. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, from a previously low base a decade ago, tourism had become a key sector for economic growth in the local economy with direct tourism and tourism-related industry supporting many jobs. Tourism is one of the largest, locally owned, internationally traded sectors of our economy. It will be important to build on the momentum already achieved and unlock the potential to attract visitors from new and emerging markets.
- The key actions relating to tourism in the Draft PfG include but are not limited to:
  - ~ Supporting priority sectors to raise awareness of their capability, establish key partnerships and secure new business in key international markets;
  - ~ Investing in the development and communication of an inspiring tourism experience which will provide international standout for NI;
  - ~ Investing in experiences and products that will give external visitors new reasons to holiday and stay longer;
  - ~ Supporting the tourism industry to invest in capability building measures to deliver long term growth;
  - ~ Creating a policy environment which enables faster growth of the tourism industry; and
  - ~ Supporting the public and private sectors to attract international investment in infrastructure and regeneration projects.



- The PfG Outcomes Delivery Plan 2019 also notes under Outcome 10 the following key actions:
  - ~ Run tactical marketing programmes to promote NI as an attractive destination;
  - ~ Host events of scale to promote investment and tourism potential;
  - ~ Deliver the Taste the Island Programme to promote NI as an attractive destination; and
  - ~ Provide a programme of activities to attract visitors to NI heritage sites.

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, Northern Ireland's tourism industry has experienced healthy growth and a significant potential for further expansion. This thematic pillar recognises that to be successful and sustainable however, there has to be a synergy between welcoming, involving and satisfying visitors; achieving a profitable and prosperous industry; engaging and benefiting host communities; and protecting and enhancing the local environment.

## Output from Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Working Group



### Introduction

The Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Working Group was tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: ***'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'***. The research and evidence (see Annex 10 for more detailed information on the evidence base) along with the consultation and engagement played a key role in formulating five priority areas for intervention which feed into the thematic pillar.

The Working Group recommended that any policy response should be people centred, putting rural dwellers at the centre of service delivery. Many of the factors affecting the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers are cross-cutting and therefore an integrated strategic approach is required.

The next section provides some detail in relation to findings pertaining to health and social wellbeing in rural areas in NI.

## Rural Health and Social Wellbeing in Northern Ireland - Key Findings

The table below outlines some of the key findings identified by the Working Group in relation to rural health and social wellbeing in NI.

Category	Findings
<b>Challenges and opportunities for rural social wellbeing in NI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are a number of challenges for those trying to access health services in rural areas such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Poor health;</li> <li>~ Lack of mobility;</li> <li>~ Poor/affordable transport; and</li> <li>~ Remoteness of and inability to access health services and the closure of GP practices in rural areas.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Whilst community based health models can be highly effective, they are struggling for resources in an increasingly regulated environment.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are issues with early years development in rural areas which can include poor language skills and low levels of physical activity resulting in obesity among children.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reducing Loneliness and Social Exclusion</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loneliness is not exclusive to one particular group and impacts across the community. Loneliness can impact lone householders (of any age), new mothers, carers, young people and can frequently be linked to a change in life circumstances (e.g. grief, relationship breakdown which may include domestic abuse, changing jobs, family dynamics, retirement and peer groups moving on/away).</li> <li>• In terms of impacts, loneliness can result in a loss of identity, vulnerability and detachment from the community resulting in further isolation and reduced community cohesion. There is a perceived stigma around loneliness and mental and emotional wellbeing, often making people reluctant to seek advice or support, highlighting the need for and importance of locally accessible support and contact.</li> <li>• Groups at particular risk of loneliness and exclusion include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Carers (of all ages), especially in the context of an ageing rural population with increased caring responsibilities; the growing number of ageing carers is also an issue which often entails one generation of older people caring for the generation above them; and</li> <li>~ Young people including those who are hard to reach. Isolation can be exacerbated by issues around mental and emotional wellbeing, paramilitaries, drugs and alcohol misuse; and social media usage. There is a need for early intervention around mental and emotional wellbeing, including work with schools, youth groups and organisations in order to build connections and capacity around engagement and inclusion.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Category	Findings																												
<p><b>Minimising the Impact of Rural Isolation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <p><b>Rural Access</b> - the geographic remoteness and associated challenge in accessing services (including lack of access to childcare, broadband, digital skills and transport) is experienced by many rural communities. Figure 9 below shows the proportion of small areas with no public transport access to selected services:</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <thead> <tr> <th>Service</th> <th>Rural &lt;= 1 hour from Belfast</th> <th>Rural &gt; 1 hour from Belfast</th> <th>All rural</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>GP premises</td> <td>2%</td> <td>8%</td> <td>4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pharmacist</td> <td>2%</td> <td>7%</td> <td>4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Day nursery or Crèche</td> <td>2%</td> <td>7%</td> <td>4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Financial Services</td> <td>2%</td> <td>8%</td> <td>4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Job Centre/Jobs &amp; Benefits Office</td> <td>3%</td> <td>9%</td> <td>5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Library</td> <td>2%</td> <td>8%</td> <td>5%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 5px;"> <span style="color: #4CAF50;">■</span> Rural &lt;= 1 hour from Belfast                        <span style="color: #00BCD4;">■</span> Rural &gt; 1 hour from Belfast                        <span style="color: #000080;">■</span> All rural                 </p> </div> </li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"> <i>Figure 9: :Source: NISRA 2017 cited in Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2019 Report Updated April 2020 (DAERA)</i> </p> <p>                     Difficulty in accessing services may be a source of disadvantage for people in rural communities, particularly for those living in more remote areas and for those without private transport. In rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, access to key services by public transport is particularly poor, with some unable to access key services at all by this means while for many others journeys by public transport may be so long and/or difficult as to be impractical. It is recognised that investment will be forthcoming in the form of City and Growth Deals with the potential to act as a catalyst for economic regeneration in rural communities, including those in the west of the province and more than an hour from Belfast.                 </p>	Service	Rural <= 1 hour from Belfast	Rural > 1 hour from Belfast	All rural	GP premises	2%	8%	4%	Pharmacist	2%	7%	4%	Day nursery or Crèche	2%	7%	4%	Financial Services	2%	8%	4%	Job Centre/Jobs & Benefits Office	3%	9%	5%	Library	2%	8%	5%
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Job Centre/Jobs & Benefits Office	3%	9%	5%																										
Library	2%	8%	5%																										

Category	Findings
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Figure 10 below depicts average journey time (mins) by car to selected services:

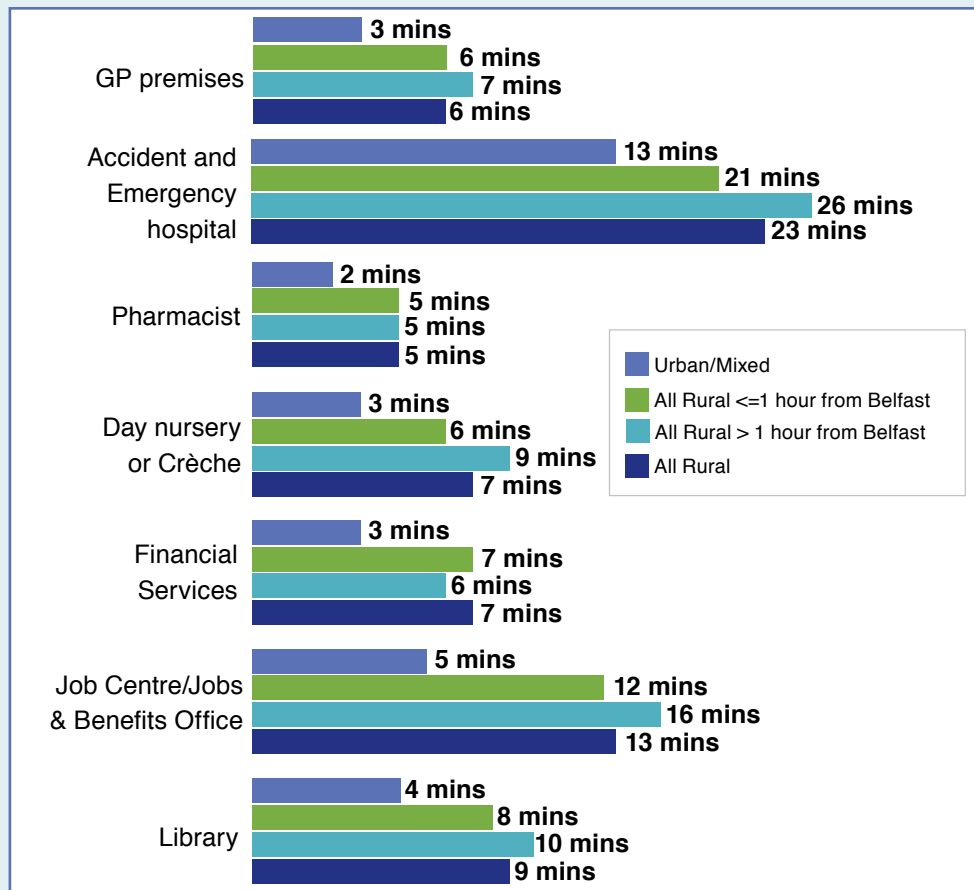


Figure 10: Source: NISRA 2017 cited in Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2019 Report Updated April 2020 (DAERA)

For rural dwellers who can travel by private transport, journey times to key services are on average twice as long as for those living in towns and cities, and this disparity is again more pronounced in rural areas distant from Belfast. The greatest differences in travel times are to accident and emergency hospitals and to job centres/jobs and benefits offices. Those living in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast are on average 26 minutes away from an Accident and Emergency department, compared to an average 13 minute drive time for those living in urban areas. These factors can have a detrimental impact on both inclusion and participation which can negatively impact on the social wellbeing and mental health of rural dwellers.

- **Isolation** - (including due to a reducing rural population) is an increasing issue for the farming community. There is a need for tailored intervention and one to one support at farm business level.

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Outreach</b> - (e.g. engagement and activity programmes, advice clinics, health checks, and befriending schemes) into isolated communities has been identified as a potential solution to reducing loneliness and isolation in rural areas. This could be delivered via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ <b>Provision of community development support</b> at the grass roots level (e.g. Rural Support Networks) to reach into rural communities and build the capacity of the community and voluntary sector, including linking groups with service providers and sectoral specialists; and</li> <li>~ <b>Area based strategy managers</b> to identify area priorities and support delivery of actions. Forms of intervention should be underpinned by local contacts and face to face connections, which are vital to addressing loneliness and isolation and engaging the truly hard to reach groups. Such contact may take a number of forms, including befriending/home visits, handyman/ maintenance programmes, sharing of advice and information.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Erosion of services</b> - (such as Post Office, banking services) combined with challenges in accessing grassroots community services has contributed to a lack of resilience and capacity for self-care. There is also growing pressure on the community and voluntary sector to replace/deliver local services and groups themselves are struggling for resources (in terms of both funding and volunteers), raising concerns about the sustainability of both services and the rural communities themselves.</li> <li>• <b>Provision of animated indoor and outdoor rural community space</b> - was identified as a mechanism that could be used to promote health and wellbeing and to address loneliness. This could be via supporting participation programmes to better encourage people to use the rural estate such as local authority physical activity programmes, and environmental education programmes such as Forest School. Affordability and accessibility will be central to the success of such programmes, including uptake by key target group such as young people and to ensure family friendly participation.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Community buildings/hubs</b> - by locating a range of activities/ services in one facility this makes best use of limited rural assets and encourages cross-sectoral working. A key benefit of community hubs is that people can access it for any purpose allowing for strengthened collaboration for health and wellbeing at both regional and local levels. Given the challenges in relation to connectivity in rural areas, it would be preferable that these hubs act as broadband and community outreach hubs, potentially utilising libraries and schools. An integrated coffee shop within the community hub would also afford people an opportunity to utilise a hub facility whilst reducing any potential stigma associated with other activities on offer. To ensure facilities are fit for purpose, the need for support in terms of small capital repair or refurbishment was identified.</li> <li>• <b>Village Hub Model</b> - taking the community hub model a step further, and recognising the need for efficiency in service delivery and strategic development, there is scope to explore a “Village Hub” model where groups within a village community work together using different spaces/ buildings for different purposes (such as sports, arts, childcare, youth activities, etc.) - but are strategic in service delivery.</li> <li>• <b>Community Transport</b> - a need was identified to address the challenges of service delivery in rural areas, such as transport, cost and travel time. Community transport is a key enabler for social wellbeing. Initiatives which could increase the number of volunteer drivers were seen as beneficial.</li> <li>• <b>Infrastructure</b> - it was noted that inter-agency co-operation is necessary to promote rural health and wellbeing. For example, access to safe drinking water was raised in terms of ensuring sufficient quality of access to bore wells and water mains.</li> <li>• <b>Capacity building</b> - the need was identified to include governance support such as committee succession planning and encouraging a culture of volunteering. Given that there is an ageing rural population and that group committees often rely on older volunteers, there is a need to support existing rural volunteers in sustaining groups whilst also attracting new volunteers and providing them with appropriate skills and</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<p>confidence to engage. Groups are also often put off submitting funding applications due to the level of bureaucracy and governance requirements. Consistency across programmes and the ability to have flexibility in dealing with applications could ensure that interventions respond appropriately to local needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Planning legislation</b> - difficulty in securing single dwelling applications approvals can contribute to younger generations moving away from rural areas, ultimately impacting on the health and wellbeing of those left in the rural areas.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Promoting Rural Health and Wellbeing</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rural deprivation</b> - issues such as unfit housing can impact negatively on health and in particular lead to an increase in chronic health conditions.</li> <li>• <b>Rural poverty</b> - a lack of access to transport and the impact of changes in benefits systems including a lack of knowledge of what benefits people are entitled to can result in some rural households slipping below the poverty line. This impacts on households in a number of ways such as food, pension or fuel poverty. Advice and support services/networks could help reduce fuel poverty. Working with other Departments and other public agencies will be required on an integrated approach to alleviate rural poverty (including addressing food poverty).</li> <li>• <b>Lack of family support services</b> - a lack of services such as rural childcare facilities can both increase isolation and negatively impact on child development, which can in turn lead to poor academic performance. Scope exists for a rural Early Years model. Rural communities have frequently identified the lack of a comparable Sure Start programme in rural areas as a key challenge to health and wellbeing, recognising the value of such a programme for both children and parents and its potential to address isolation and deprivation in some of the most disadvantaged communities. Such a model would require extensive inter-departmental collaboration and resourcing.</li> <li>• <b>Mental and Emotional Wellbeing</b> - access to support services in relation to mental and emotional wellbeing within rural communities was identified as a priority with a need for timely access to services when in crisis (i.e. waiting lists are not an appropriate response). Whilst these issues affect wider society, matters are exacerbated further for rural dwellers due to poor transport and access to services.</li> </ul>



Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="424 331 1471 600">• <b>Social supermarket model</b> - can help those who are finding the costs of food difficult to meet due to low income and scarce resources. The social supermarket can provide access to surplus food from mainstream retail outlets at major discounts and can be considered to be particularly beneficial for facilitation of personal connections and the ability to link beneficiaries with wraparound services.</li> <li data-bbox="424 629 1471 801">• <b>Enhancing current initiatives</b> - there are a number of existing out of hours initiatives available to rural communities which could be built upon (e.g. Libraries NI and Your School Your Club which allows access to facilities outside of normal hours).</li> <li data-bbox="424 831 1471 1597">• <b>Community development led health and wellbeing interventions</b> - these should accommodate primary health care providers working collaboratively with the community and voluntary sector to reach those most at risk. A bottom-up community development approach is most effective empowering people to better tackle their educational, employment, training, health, socioeconomic issues. Learning could be taken from the existing Healthy Living Centre partnership model. For example, existing sub-regional models/partnerships could be pulled on to act as local conduits between grass roots and service providers/statutory bodies. Any service delivery model should seek to use sectoral specialists (such as older people's partnerships, youth forums, mental health agencies, advice services, Rural Support, BME groups, farmers, those affected by alcohol/substance misuse, those engaging in Anti-Social Behaviour and those affected by domestic abuse) where possible. This approach will also avoid duplication/displacement of existing providers who have specialist knowledge and support enablers to deliver/direct services to the most vulnerable.</li> <li data-bbox="424 1626 1471 2072">• <b>Social Prescribing</b> - this involves medical professionals referring their patients to a range of activities and community service that seek to address people's needs in a holistic way. Activities can include: stress and anxiety reducing programmes; volunteering projects; walking groups; befriending services and a range of other local activities that promotes positive physical and mental and emotional wellbeing and tackles social isolation. Any such initiative must focus on ensuring a quality and sustainable model of prescribing. Referrals should be tailored and matched to the capacity of the hosting group/project in order to be sustainable and deliver meaningful outcomes for both</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<p>parties. Host groups may also require small financial support to deliver such services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social Farming</b> - this involves an innovative use of agriculture to promote therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas. Social farming can generate social inclusion outcomes for farmers while offering the participant a person centred model. It has the ability to positively contribute to both mental and emotional wellbeing and physical activity.</li> <li>• <b>Inter-generational Working</b> - Strengthening of linkages between service providers and rural dwellers, including work with sectoral specialists such as Youth agencies and Age Friendly partnerships. This could include supporting life-long learning and participation and healthy active ageing, as well as supporting inter-generational working.</li> </ul>

In light of some of the barriers identified above, there is a clear need to promote rural focused interventions which target those most at risk of isolation and loneliness, recognising the challenges associated with service delivery in rural areas and mindful of the need for interventions tailored to the specifics of rural living - isolated and often insular communities and individuals, lack of connectivity and gradual service erosion which has impacted negatively on health and wellbeing.

The next section outlines in detail, how the Working Group developed the priority interventions under the rural health and social wellbeing thematic pillar. The scope of these interventions illustrates the importance of inter-departmental working, with potential to lever in funds from other government departments.

## Development of the Priority Interventions

The Working Group interventions are framed within the context of five key elements: Champion; Build Capacity, Reduce, Sustain and Community Assets to ensure successful delivery of the thematic pillar. The Working Group considered the information and evidence base available to it and sought to develop a range of interventions which placed social wellbeing for rural communities at the heart of the policy making agenda. It recognised the need for DAERA to act as a Rural Champion, raising awareness, promoting and supporting action on the issues identified around rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness. There was a clear recognition that DAERA cannot act in isolation, rather that joint working across a range of policy areas will be required to bring about positive outcomes for rural dwellers and communities.

Partnership working is at the core of the interventions identified, reflective of the need for collaboration within and between sectors to support and sustain communities and villages. This will ensure that the needs of those most at risk are heard and responded to, working through established networks and supporting capacity in those areas where such infrastructure is lacking to develop a person centred approach and better position rural communities both socially and economically.

Each element is outlined in more detail below:

- **Champion** - there is a need for awareness raising of rural issues, with DAERA positioned as a Rural Champion. Aligned to this is a need to further integrate agri-food and rural affairs, promoting the mutual relationship and benefits.
- **Build Capacity** - capacity and governance support is required to sustain and succession plan for committees and groups taking the form of resourced partnerships, networks and local authority models. Investment in community capacity will better enable a community to engage and articulate its needs and potentially contribute to addressing them. Co-ordinated and strategic delivery will be required to avoid any duplication.

It is essential that funding processes are more user friendly as they are currently too complex and off-putting, placing too much burden on volunteers. For example, the Rural Support Network (RSN) support provided via the micro grants has been an effective model in supporting groups access funding. Groups would also require capital and revenue support to ensure any service delivery is fit-for-purpose.

- **Reduce** - In accessing those most at risk of isolation, the Maximising Access to Services, Grants and Benefits in Rural Areas (MARA) project was a very effective model. This and any initiative, must be seen in the context of existing services/provision including Affordable Warmth/Warmer Homes, Home Safety, Wraparound, Make the Call, Handyperson, Health and Wellbeing Plans, Council Environmental Health teams.

- **Sustain** - There is a need for rural communities to become more sustainable and viable economic centres.
- **Community Assets** - These need to be used across the whole community and where possible become hubs to deliver multiple activities and services to rural communities.

The following priority interventions have therefore 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.

The diagram below summarises the five interventions for the rural health and social wellbeing thematic pillar.



## Stakeholder Engagement (pre-consultation)

A stakeholder event was held in January 2020 to review engagement findings across all five policy Working Groups. Overall the feedback was positive, with the proposed thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention endorsed on the day. In regards to each thematic pillar, the stakeholders were asked their views on what they agreed with; and what needed changed or was missing. The feedback received in relation to the rural health and social wellbeing thematic pillar from the public rural stakeholder engagement event held in January 2020 is summarised below (detailed feedback received on the day is available in Annex 11):

- Succession planning is essential;
- Volunteerism should be encouraged;
- Existing rural estate and assets should be utilised;
- The potential for faith based groups in service delivery should be considered; and
- There is a need for inter-departmental co-operation (including DoH and DfC) given the cross-cutting nature of issues identified.

The next section outlines some potential implications that have since been identified due to COVID-19.

## Potential Implications of COVID-19

The Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Working Group presented their evidence and findings prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To ensure that the Rural Policy Framework accurately reflects need, Working Group Members were asked in May 2020 to advise if there were any impacts on priorities previously identified or emerging issues that may need to be taken into account.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Rural Health and Social Wellbeing were highlighted as follows:

- Issues already identified by the Working Group remain and are even more valid now as the needs in rural communities will increase. The priority of this work is increased by a rise in needs.
- Whilst there is no evidence available yet on the long-term impacts of shielding/isolation /social distancing there is likely to be an increase in rural isolation, rural social exclusion, rural poverty and mental and emotional wellbeing difficulties impacting on rural communities. There is also likely to be increased financial hardship and poverty across communities compounded by both the loss of EU funding and COVID-19.

- Innovation needs to be encouraged with best practice shared on a cross-cutting level. Any lessons learned should also be recorded.
- Rural communities will need practical support and funding to allow them to adapt and change to find new ways of delivering services (especially in light of those people who may be asked to continue to shield). It was suggested that funding may be needed on a rolling programme basis to allow groups to apply as and when a need arises as opposed to an open/close call.
- Opportunities need to be grasped in a timely manner such as the significant increase in volunteering and ensuring its sustainability which could be via training etc.; the opportunity to bring forward a 'community of practice hub approach'; maximising on initiatives such as social farming that allow for social distancing. Consideration could also be given to older people having access to digital technology; localised befriending services etc. The importance of enabling personal connections and signposting between rural dwellers and service providers should not be underestimated.
- There is a need to invest in support for community space/infrastructure as well as people to ensure that they remain fit for purpose in serving the needs of the community. There will also be an increased need for outdoor space to help communities to maintain social distancing.
- A publication by the Centre for Mental Health - 'BRIEFING Covid-19 and the nation's mental health: May 2020'<sup>20</sup> highlighted the following:
  - ~ The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to lead to an increase in mental ill health in the UK, as a result of both the illness itself and the measures being taken to protect people from the virus;
  - ~ It has already been widely acknowledged that social distancing and lockdown measures may increase exposure to domestic violence and abuse;
  - ~ If the economic impact is similar to that of the post 2008 recession, then we could expect 500,000 additional people experiencing mental health problems, with depression being the most common;
  - ~ The economic impact is likely to affect different parts of the country differently and therefore the likely increased prevalence of mental illness will be unevenly distributed;
  - ~ If the economic impact results in significant unemployment, there is a major risk of an increase in suicides unless action is taken to prevent this loss of life; and

<sup>20</sup> Available at: [www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/CentreforMentalHealth\\_COVID\\_MH\\_Forecasting\\_May20.pdf](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/CentreforMentalHealth_COVID_MH_Forecasting_May20.pdf)

- ~ The various 'safety net' initiatives introduced by the Government are likely to be offering some significant protection to people's wellbeing. How and when these are dismantled are also likely to be critical to the fallout in terms of mental wellbeing following this crisis.

Feedback outlined above indicated that no changes are required to the high level priority interventions given that the interventions are broad enough to incorporate the issues identified above. However, it is apparent that the interventions are more relevant now with potential increased identified need and a call to fast track the implementation of a number of those interventions if possible.

## Public Consultation Respondent Views

In addition to the information already identified, respondents to the 2021 public consultation noted the following in relation to Rural Health and Social Wellbeing:

- Need to include recognition of specific impacts crime has on people in rural areas including domestic and sexual violence.
- The mental health crisis has worsened through COVID-19, particularly with a strain on counselling services with lengthy waiting lists.
- Need for additional social and affordable housing in rural settlements to be met in partnership with DfC, the Housing Executive and Housing Associations. This was raised as an issue by respondents across all pillars and going forward whilst DAERA recognise that housing is not a statutory obligation of the Department, we will seek to champion this need through working in partnership with other Departments and agencies.
- COVID-19 and EU Exit has created pressures which have increased food costs and reduced food availability, compounding food poverty. There is a need for safe and affordable food with agriculture; food production; and health policies complementing each other more closely.
- A need for food innovation whilst ensuring ongoing environmental sustainability and consideration of plant based alternatives and nature friendly meat products.
- A need for adequate resourcing in rural areas for those in the LGBT+ community as they are more likely to experience social isolation than the population as a whole, particularly since the pandemic.
- Initiatives such as farmer to farmer networks and group tidy ups (e.g. Tidy Towns) 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.

- Capital funding for health and wellbeing projects being taken forward by community planning statutory partners.
- Community groups and rural networks need more support and long-term funding.
- The DAERA rural halls refurbishment pilot scheme was commended with suggestions that it should be rolled out.
- DAERA needs to link into other funding opportunities such as PEACE+ to address the priority areas of intervention.
- Poverty is a key determinant of ill health and programmes of support should address rural poverty. Interventions should also have synergy with strategies under development by DfC, in particular the NI Anti-Poverty Strategy. COVID has exacerbated poverty (including food and fuel 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. When targeting interventions, it was noted that consideration should be given to poverty, disability and service coverage including targeted interventions to address pockets of severe deprivation.
- Concern that health services were becoming more centralised with chronic waiting lists 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.
- Increasing need for rural community transport provision.
- Need for community development led interventions complementing the community planning process. Capacity and skills development are 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 and the uncertainty in relation to the future may require increased levels of mental health interventions for farm families.
- The health and wellbeing thematic pillar should be a central hub for other themes and not standalone.



## Linkages to Programme for Government Outcomes

Rural Health and Social Wellbeing contribute to seven of the twelve Programme for Government outcomes as follows:

- **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; and
- **Outcome 12:** We give our children and young people the best start in life.

Whilst Rural Health and Social Wellbeing contributes to many PfG Outcomes, we believe there are linkages to the Outcomes outlined above as follows:

- Good physical and mental health brings social and economic benefits both at an individual and societal level, whereas poor health restricts quality of life and reduces opportunities and productivity;
- For individuals, families and communities to take greater control over their lives and be enabled and supported to lead healthy lives, active collaboration is needed across government and with local government, the community and voluntary sector, private businesses and other organisations and delivery partners to address the factors which impact on health and wellbeing;
- It is important that we support all rural dwellers in our society to build self-confidence and capacity to live independent self-fulfilling lives and in particular, those who are vulnerable, and ensure they have the means to help themselves and can live their lives free from fear, discrimination, and exclusion; and
- Caring for others and helping those in need is fundamental to the overall achievement of conditions of societal wellbeing.

## Conclusion

Our rural areas are diverse ranging from open countryside to small towns, villages and hamlets. The number of people living in rural areas is increasing with an ageing population. The tendency to idealise rural living and to make assumptions about what it is like can be a barrier to recognising rural circumstances. This thematic pillar recognises the wider social determinants to health and wellbeing and a need to respond to the specific needs of people living in many different types of rural settlements.



## Output from Rural Employment Working Group



### Introduction

Working Group 4 was tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: ***'To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas'***. The research and evidence (see Annex 12 for more detailed information on the evidence base) along with the consultation and engagement played a key role in formulating three priority areas for intervention which feed into the thematic pillar.

As referenced before there is some degree of similarity between thematic pillars 4 and 1. Therefore, in order to avoid any potential overlap, pillar 1 focuses more on the 'business' aspect (i.e. encouraging innovation within existing businesses and the creation of new businesses).

The next section provides some detail on employment in rural areas in NI as identified by the Working Group.

### Strategic Context - Rural Employment and Skills

The draft DfE Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland <sup>21</sup> notes that the key issues which have constrained Northern Ireland's economic and social development include:

- The prevalence of individuals with low, or no qualifications;
- Limited opportunities for high paying jobs and pathways for career progression; and
- A 'skills deficit' and comparatively poor productivity performance.

The Skills Strategy set out an economic vision for a '10x Economy' requiring transformation in the skills system. The key objectives of the Skills Strategy includes:

- Addressing skills imbalances, driving economic growth;
- Creating a culture of lifelong learning; and
- Enhancing digital skills, developing a digital spine.

Data provided within the Labour Force Survey October-December 2019 shows that there are a number of council areas, which are largely rural with levels of economic inactivity higher than the norm for NI. Councils with higher levels of inactivity than the norm include Causeway Coast and Glens, Derry City and Strabane, Fermanagh and Omagh and Newry Mourne and Down Council. There is a rationale for investment in interventions, which have the potential to help address barriers or create opportunities relating to economic activity and employability.

<sup>21</sup> DfE Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland - Skills for a 10x Economy (2021) available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/skills-strategy-10x-economy-consultation.pdf>

Job creation has been one of, if not the highest prioritised outcomes sought from business support agencies over the past decade in NI. Many grants and subsidies offered from organisations such as Invest NI have had binding requirements to meet job creation targets. Administrators and applicants to the current Priority 6 programme (Rural Development Programme 2014-2020) will be familiar with this emphasis on job creation. The programme's Rural Business Investment Scheme offered capital grants of up to £90,000 for businesses, however these applications required an outline plan for job growth within the applicant's business in order to be eligible for funding. The scheme has led to significant job creation within rural businesses over the past five years.

In addition to the Priority 6 programme, TRPSI funded projects such as Prosper and Step Up to Sustainable Employment (SUSE) provide examples of initiatives which have successfully assisted young unemployed and those in lower paid employment, into better jobs.

The next section outlines some key findings in relation to employment in rural areas in NI.

## Rural Employment in Northern Ireland - Key Findings

The table below outlines some of the key findings identified by the Working Group in relation to rural employment in NI. These findings were identified in early 2020, therefore where feasible we have updated statistics using the most recent information available to us.

Category	Findings
<b>Regional Dynamics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eurostat, the data agency of the European Union identifies NI as one of the poorest regions in the UK in terms of Gross Domestic Product per capita.</li> <li>• NI is the 2nd youngest UK region (median age 38.7) after London (35.3).</li> <li>• There is an overdependence on low productivity, low pay industries such as farming and food production. An example of this is the agri-food sector which makes up 4.6% of total employment in NI compared to 2.3% in the UK and accounts for 3.7% of NI Gross Value Added (GVA) compared to 2% for the UK.</li> <li>• There are areas of high deprivation, particularly in border areas with 7 out of the 10 most deprived Super Output Areas (SOAs) in the Border areas (and therefore rural).</li> <li>• Despite difficulties, rural population growth is out pacing urban population growth (16% between 2000 and 2018 in rural areas vs 6% in urban areas).</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
<b>Barriers for Companies to Undertake Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary issue for many employers is access to sufficiently skilled labour, which is restricting the growth potential of rural companies in terms of both market size and global reach. Examples outlined by the Working Group include the Mid Ulster engineering cluster, and the food and drink sector where skills shortages have been identified in production and production management.</li> <li>• There is an uncertain and unpredictable ‘skills pipeline’ highlighting the need to promote the establishment of linkages between local employers and education/training providers. Such linkages are required to develop a pipeline of people with the skills and qualifications needed to support growth sectors and which also connect young people to key sectors (e.g. farming, engineering, IT, environmental industries). This could provide a mechanism to reflect rural business needs at stakeholder level while also providing the rural economy with tailored skills to meet evidenced demand. There is potential for further developing the links between Further Education Colleges and the Universities and rural businesses to provide tailored apprenticeships and skills development initiatives aligned to the needs of growth sectors in the rural economy.</li> <li>• The adult population of more remote rural areas have on average a lower level of formal educational attainment than those living in urban areas. Consultation also acknowledged that some of the barriers to employability relate to the personal circumstances of rural dwellers, highlighting a need for interventions in the form of Employability Programmes.</li> </ul>
<b>Barriers for People Seeking to Obtain Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most commonly associated difficulty concerning employment is the availability of employment opportunities in areas across NI, which contributes to issues such as unemployment and emigration from the countryside.</li> <li>• According to a number of Advice Networks, poverty is increasing and presents a real barrier to entering training or employment. Any increase in base rate (i.e. increased mortgage/loan repayments and reduction in finance/affordability) could present a multitude of scenarios impacting on rural poverty and the sustainability of farms and rural enterprises.</li> <li>• There is a continuing link between poverty and unemployment with 19% of the NI population living in relative poverty. Poverty is the prime determinant of ill health, which is in turn the single most significant barrier to entering the labour market. This is a significant barrier to employability in the most deprived rural Super Output Areas (SOA)</li> </ul>

Category	Findings																										
	<p>while low wages are associated with sectors prevalent in rural areas such as construction, agriculture and agri-food.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The levels of reported (and anecdotal) poor mental and emotional wellbeing are increasing in rural communities. This has a clear impact on the ability of people to consider undertaking training or entering the labour market and sustaining their involvement with it.</li> <li>• Traditional practical barriers to employability (training and employment) still remain for rural dwellers and need to be addressed to facilitate those living in rural areas in becoming economically active. Central barriers include access to affordable childcare and more effective/affordable rural transport solutions.</li> <li>• Support for enabling young people into employment was highlighted due to concerns that young people are moving away/abroad due to lack of employment opportunities or they have little/no appetite for work/employment. Current Tackling Rural Poverty Social Isolation (TRPSI) funded projects such as Prosper and Step Up to Sustainable Employment (SUSE) were seen as examples of initiatives that have successfully assisted young unemployed and those in lower paid employment, into better jobs.</li> <li>• The NI economic inactivity rate (16-64 years old) was 26.2%. This was equivalent to 306,000 economically inactive people. The table below shows economic inactivity in NI by local government district:</li> </ul> <table border="1" data-bbox="448 1406 1445 2047"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="448 1406 1082 1458">Local Government District</th> <th data-bbox="1082 1406 1445 1458">Rate (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1458 1082 1509">Antrim and Newtownabbey</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1458 1445 1509">20.6%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1509 1082 1561">Ards and North Down</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1509 1445 1561">25.3%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1561 1082 1612">Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1561 1445 1612">25.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1612 1082 1664">Belfast</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1612 1445 1664">30.5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1664 1082 1715">Causeway Coast and Glens</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1664 1445 1715">29.9%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1715 1082 1767">Derry City and Strabane</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1715 1445 1767">30.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1767 1082 1818">Fermanagh and Omagh</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1767 1445 1818">33.1%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1818 1082 1870">Lisburn and Castlereagh</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1818 1445 1870">17.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1870 1082 1921">Mid and East Antrim</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1870 1445 1921">23.9%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1921 1082 1973">Mid Ulster</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1921 1445 1973">26.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 1973 1082 2024">Newry, Mourne and Down</td> <td data-bbox="1082 1973 1445 2024">26.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="448 2024 1082 2047"><b>Northern Ireland Total</b></td> <td data-bbox="1082 2024 1445 2047"><b>26.2%</b></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p data-bbox="448 2069 1445 2101"><i>Source - Labour Force Survey, 2019, published on 1st October 2020.</i></p>	Local Government District	Rate (%)	Antrim and Newtownabbey	20.6%	Ards and North Down	25.3%	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	25.7%	Belfast	30.5%	Causeway Coast and Glens	29.9%	Derry City and Strabane	30.4%	Fermanagh and Omagh	33.1%	Lisburn and Castlereagh	17.4%	Mid and East Antrim	23.9%	Mid Ulster	26.2%	Newry, Mourne and Down	26.2%	<b>Northern Ireland Total</b>	<b>26.2%</b>
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Category	Findings
<b>Economic Viability of Working in Rural Areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low wages associated with sectors, which are prevalent in rural areas; construction, agriculture and agri-food mean that the most employable are drawn to work and often move to urban areas. People living in rural areas have a lower median salary of £20,466 compared to those in urban areas £22,630 (2019 figures).</li> <li>• The Travel Survey NI for 2016-18 revealed that workers from rural areas had an average commute of around 50% further than workers in towns and cities, and travelled on average more than 500 additional miles per year to their workplace. This poses not only financial issues (cost of fuel or using public transport), but also quality of life issues, particularly drivers who have long car journeys and/or congestion.</li> <li>• Previously, the Rural Business Investment Scheme was found to be overly bureaucratic and time consuming which can be off-putting for many Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) whose owners do not have the skills, time or technical support required to complete effective applications. There is a requirement to promote sectoral competitiveness, innovation and research and development investment initiatives through rural enterprises. This would help to support growth and an increase in median wages/salaries in rural enterprises.</li> <li>• Rural transport continues to be a limiting factor (financial accessibility combined with timetabling) to accessing employability initiatives, training and employment support for rural dwellers.</li> <li>• Suitable childcare creates a challenge to rural industry in meeting their demand for the skilled labour to achieve sustainable growth.</li> <li>• According to the NI Labour Force Survey 2018, people living in rural areas are more likely to be in employment than those in urban areas (75% rural/ 67% urban), be highly skilled (51% rural/46% urban) and enjoy higher job satisfaction (84% rural/78% urban).</li> </ul>
<b>Impact of Poor Broadband Connectivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The limited quality of connectivity/broadband is still a significant barrier to increasing rural businesses start up rate and growth. In 2019, only 66% of the rural population has access to superfast broadband, compared to 98% in urban areas.</li> <li>• Poor connectivity also impedes distance learning, and inhibits the growth of a lifelong learning culture in rural communities.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
<p><b>Sustainability of Social Enterprises</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating a transition to more sustainable rural social enterprises is important if barriers to employability are to be addressed and rural based opportunities for transitioning to part/full-time employment are to be created. From a community economic development perspective, rural community groups/organisations are an important part of rural society. Social enterprises based in rural communities have the potential to create training and employment opportunities for a range of target groups including adults post-18 years exiting the special needs education environment, people on the autism spectrum and people dealing with/ coping with life challenges (e.g. addictions, anxiety, and depression).</li> <li>• Social enterprises could potentially provide accommodation to facilitate ‘working from home’ or other flexible working arrangements.</li> <li>• In terms of support for social enterprises, DAERA has piloted models of refurbishing heritage/listed buildings (Village Catalyst). Underutilised rural assets could provide a base for rural enterprises and social enterprises.</li> <li>• A focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) has taken away from community outreach education in local community facilities. There is potential for development of social enterprise schemes (such as Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes; handyman scheme). There is also a need for a more proactive and creative approach (e.g. community shops in rural areas).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Productivity, Innovation and Competitiveness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Farm Diversification</b> - a need was identified for the replacement of the former Rural Diversification Programme. Any new programme should be set in the context that self-employment is not the ideal or appropriate solution to employability as only a small percentage of people have the skills, desire and personal characteristics to progress into self-employment. Any agriculture based skills and development pathway should also consider initiatives to address a current lack of succession planning amongst the farming community. In addition, the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRD) identifies the tourism as a significant opportunity for rural NI with its stunning landscapes and scenery. There is an opportunity to encourage diversification from farming towards provision of tourism infrastructure that will in turn increase the sustainability of the rural economy.</li> <li>• Improvement in business performance could lead to employment opportunities with rural businesses.</li> </ul>



Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research activity is low across all sectors with uptake of new technology and participation in knowledge transfer activity relatively low in NI. A greater adoption of innovation and knowledge transfer in agriculture and food production could impact significantly on the productivity of the industry.</li> <li>• Rising costs, market volatility and profitability are an ongoing challenge for farmers and food producers. According to DAERA, the 'Total Income from Farming' (TIFF) in Northern Ireland fell by 25% from £386 million in 2018 to £290 million in 2019. There is a need to improve efficiency and reduce overall costs within the industry in order to remain competitive.</li> </ul>

The next section outlines in detail, how the Working Group developed the priority interventions under the rural employment thematic pillar.

## Development of the Priority Interventions

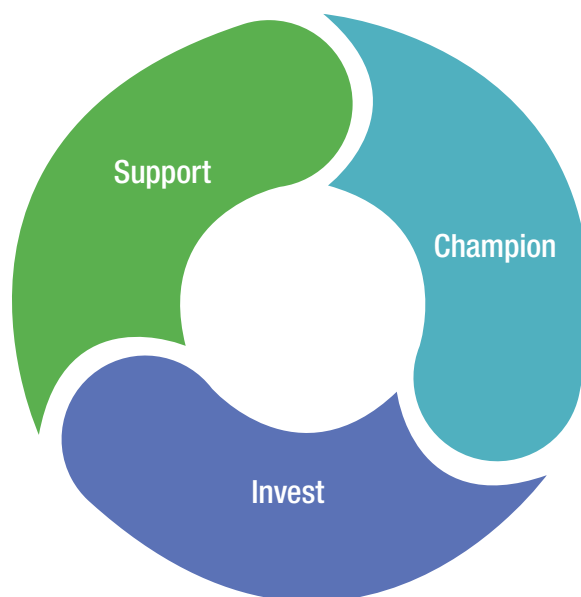
The Working Group interventions are framed within the context of three key elements: Support; Champion; and Invest to ensure successful delivery of the thematic pillar. Each element is outlined in more detail below:

- **Support** - this addresses economic growth and sustainability by providing employment opportunities.
- **Champion** - this relates to practical support for dwellers and covers areas such as accessibility, available childcare etc.
- **Invest** - this relates to specific support for dwellers and covers areas such as training, engagement with schools.

The following priority interventions have therefore 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.

The diagram below summarises the three interventions for the rural employment thematic pillar.



Many of the issues pertaining to rural employment are cross-cutting and therefore an integrated strategic approach is required. DAERA must take the lead role in championing the specific requirements of the rural economy and rural employability. Partnership working will be required with DfE, DE and organisations such as Invest NI. A range of colleges, providers and sectors such as age sector platforms, industries, social economy and childcare etc. need to be involved in developing quality interventions ensuring that duplication does not occur and that learning/resources can be shared.

Some interventions will require significant capital funding and may be led by rural community organisations. It will therefore be important to identify match funding solutions.

## Stakeholder Engagement (pre-consultation)

A stakeholder event was held in January 2020 to review engagement findings across all five policy Working Groups. Overall the feedback was positive, with the proposed thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention endorsed on the day. In regards to each thematic pillar, the stakeholders were asked their views on what they agreed with; and what needed changed or was missing. The feedback received in relation to the rural employment thematic pillar from the public rural stakeholder engagement event held in January 2020 is summarised below (detailed feedback received on the day is available in Annex 13):

- A strong consensus was reached around encouraging college outreach into rural communities and a recognition that libraries can also play a role in awareness raising and sharing information on opportunities;

- Connections should be built between education/colleges and the private sector, in particular the area of apprenticeships. This model would strengthen links between businesses and the education sector, providing practical opportunities for joint working with the potential to act as a catalyst for future policy interventions and ensure that the needs of local businesses and the rural economy can be addressed through educational stakeholders (e.g. the Further Education Colleges providing apprenticeship support in partnership with growth employers based in rural areas or aligned to growth sectors in the rural economy);
- Recognition of the importance and potential of the agri-food industry (a main private sector employer) in rural job creation including a need to focus on agri-food skills;
- Potential of environmental and renewable energy employment opportunities in the context of sustainable development in rural areas;
- With regards to rural businesses, a common issue cited was the need to work with Planners around planning legislation;
- On agricultural matters, the need to consider the impact of loss of EU funding on farmers was noted while stakeholders also highlighted that there is a need for succession planning in both farm and non-farm businesses as part of any initiative to sustain the rural economy;
- There is crossover between some Thematic Pillars and Priority Areas for intervention;
- Rural Hubs can support employability, including through hot desk facilities;
- Childcare issues were raised, with attendees stating that provision needs to consider both quality and affordability; and
- Recognition of the challenges faced by carers and the obstacles they face in entering or sustaining employment.

The next section outlines some potential implications that have since been identified due to COVID-19.

## Potential Implications of COVID-19

The Rural Employment Working Group presented their evidence and findings prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To ensure that the Rural Policy Framework accurately reflects need, Working Group Members were asked in May 2020 to advise if there were any impacts on priorities previously identified or emerging issues that may need to be taken into account.

No feedback was received from the Working Group Members in relation to this, other than a reference to the poor quality of Broadband in some parts of Northern Ireland and the impact of this both on those working from home and also children being home schooled.

## Public Consultation Respondent Views

In addition to the information already identified, respondents to the 2021 public consultation noted the following in relation to Rural Employment:

- A need for better and wider range of housing products was identified. Household needs change over time and working from home can only be facilitated if there is affordable housing available.
- Some areas were heavily reliant on migrant workers and now have a declining population - importance of a differentiated and more flexible migration policy.
- Skills deficits can be a consequence of poor terms and conditions associated with particular industries such as caring professions and hospitality which tend to have long working hours and low pay.
- The costs to train employees in a conventional way are very high - consideration of virtual or simulation training for trades.
- Linkages needed to DfE 'A Skills Strategy for NI - Skills for a 10x Economy'.
- Councils possibly 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.
- Sustaining jobs is as important as job creation.
- Need for green jobs, possibly via a green jobs scheme, however, also concerns that machinery would replace jobs.
- Interventions 1 and 2 were considered quite broad and consideration to be given to how they are measured.
- Need for support to non-farming enterprises and allowing farm diversification.
- Working from home could also result in an increased demand for nursery places in rural areas.
- Need for affordable and accessible childcare in rural areas.

## Linkages to Programme for Government Outcomes

Rural Employment contributes to five of the twelve Programme for Government outcomes as follows:

- **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; and
- **Outcome 12:** We give our children and young people the best start in life.

We believe that Rural Employment links into the Programme for Government Outcomes outlined above as follows:

- Work with schools, colleges and employers be undertaken to improve the links between education and employment, identify the gaps and opportunities that currently exist and take measures to address these;
- Work with sectoral partners, including colleges and enterprise agencies will be undertaken to strengthen the rural skills base and rural economy;
- Access to employment is central to developing the rural economy and is a vital component in building successful communities. The interventions will encourage local rural economic development through employment and training opportunities;
- Interventions will consider sustainable development and how renewable energy can contribute to rural economies, recognising both environmental and economic benefits; and
- Rural job creation is central to sustaining rural communities, providing well paid employment in local communities to increase the attractiveness of communities and address rural depopulation which has an adverse impact on wider rural wellbeing.

## Conclusion

Access to well-paid employment is a key factor in creating thriving rural communities. Equally access to a skilled labour force is a vital element in supporting rural business growth. This thematic pillar recognises that the future sustainability of our rural communities will be dependent upon the development of new ways to link and address both these challenges. For example, the priority interventions outlined above identify actions that could increase business starts, generate new/additional jobs, increase innovation and encourage export potential.

## Output from Connectivity Working Group



### Introduction

Working Group 5 was tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: **'To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas'**. The research and evidence (see Annex 14 for more detailed information on the evidence base) along with the consultation and engagement played a key role in formulating four priority areas for intervention which feed into the thematic pillar.

The main focus of the Connectivity Working Group was on infrastructure, broadband, accessibility, and commuting. Given that most of the issues relating to connectivity between rural and urban areas are outside the responsibility of DAERA, cross Departmental buy-in to the proposals is essential. Work must continue with other Government Departments to implement the Rural Needs Act with a particular focus on ensuring investments in rural broadband, communications and roads infrastructure as vital components of a competitive and regionally balanced economy.

The next section provides some detail on connectivity between urban and rural areas in NI as identified by the Working Group.

### NI Context - Connectivity between Rural and Urban Areas

Rural areas have become increasingly integrated with their urban neighbours. Rather than a rural versus urban binary, there is now a rural-urban interface where rural dwellers in NI travel into urban spaces for work, to access services, to shop, and to access cultural events/festivals. Urban dwellers come to rural areas for recreation, tourism and weekend breaks. Rural and urban areas are increasingly linked together. Connectivity is the means by which rural and urban enhance and complement each other.

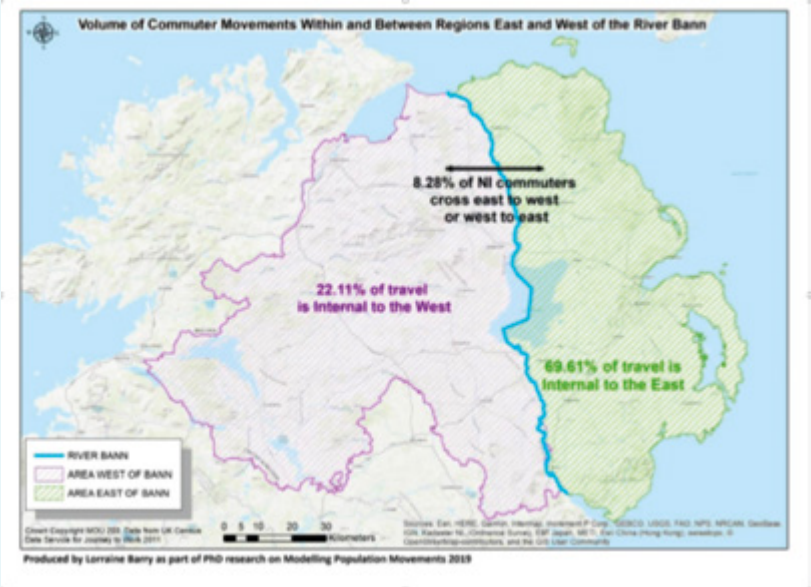
Growing a regional economy will benefit from strong cities and rural areas. Rural areas, including towns and villages, have a key role in supporting economic growth. They offer opportunities in terms of their potential for growth in new sectors, the provision of rural recreation and tourism, and their attractiveness as places to invest, live and work. Balanced growth and tackling regional imbalance are critical issues. This means places having a co-ordinated approach to the provision of services, employment and infrastructure and a focus on cooperation between service providers. For example, given that employment is often concentrated in urban centres it is important for rural wellbeing that there are adequate transport provisions.

The next section outlines some of the key findings identified by the connectivity Working Group.

## Connectivity in Northern Ireland - Key Findings

The table below outlines some of the key findings in relation to connectivity in NI. These findings were identified in early 2020, therefore where feasible we have updated statistics using the most recent information available to us.

Category	Findings
<b>Climate Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-evaluating and reducing commuting will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions. This could be done via the development of broadband hubs in small towns and villages.</li> <li>• Remote working could also lead to improvements in quality of life and health. If remote working is promoted in the region, it can lead to the development of remote working spaces that will re-use retail space in smaller settlements and support local businesses. Remote working will need to be actively promoted by the public sector as a positive way of working contributing to a sustainable living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructure/ Transport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate infrastructure can enhance employment and education opportunities, access to rural leisure activities, and increasing population growth in rural areas helping to support their sustainability.</li> <li>• Population projections indicate that the population of rural areas is to increase which will place further pressure on the limited infrastructure leading to longer travel times to access educational, training and employment opportunities.</li> <li>• The key factor for government departments is not to eliminate differences in access times between urban and rural areas, but to ensure that quality services are available within a reasonable travel time and invest in infrastructure to support this.</li> <li>• DfI currently subsidise financially loss-making Translink rural bus routes and the rail network.</li> <li>• Whilst there is a perception that most rural travel is to Belfast, 8% of commuters cross East to West or West to East of the Bann. 22% of journey to work movements are internal to the west, and 70% are internal to the east. This highlights the need to ensure that towns and rural areas in the West are adequately connected. Figure 11 below shows the volume of commuter movements within and between regions East and West of the River Bann.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	 <p data-bbox="443 981 1455 1108"><i>Figure 11 Evidence by Lorraine Barry (DfI) - as part of a PhD (2019) in modelling journey to work movements based on 2011 census journey to work data at super output area level.</i></p> <ul data-bbox="443 1137 1471 1892" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The DfI Rural Transport Fund (RTF) established in 1998 aims to reduce social isolation of rural dwellers with a Dial-a-Lift transport option for those who live in rural areas and have difficulty accessing everyday services due to a lack of transport.</li> <li>• In 2018/2019 funding to the Rural Community Transport Partnerships was £2.4 million with 232,470 trips delivered.</li> <li>• Easilink Community Transport (ECT) highlight the importance of place-based solutions to rural needs and the success of the RTF and the Assisted Rural Transport Scheme (ARTS). For example, while most rural people begin their journey in their car, the emphasis for connectivity and environmental sustainability, needs to be on policy measures that get commuters out of their cars and onto public transport as quickly as possible.</li> <li>• Transport provision also needs to be considered for urban dwellers travelling to rural areas for recreation, tourism and weekend breaks.</li> </ul>



Category	Findings
<b>Broadband</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to broadband is an essential part of most people’s daily lives. Digital connection is necessary for successful business development and operation. Service provision is always changing, and many people now rely on digital access to bank, grocery shop and pay bills. Interpersonal connectivity also relies heavily on digital inclusion. Friends and family stay in touch through Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and other digital platforms.</li> <li>• In the past, there has been a digital divide between urban and rural areas, and between some rural areas and other rural areas.</li> <li>• Many parts of rural NI do not have sufficient access to broadband and lags behind urban provision. In 2019, NI had the highest proportion of non-internet users in the UK (14.2%) followed by the North East of England (12.1%).</li> <li>• According to Ofcom data at September 2020 there is a high uptake of broadband in both urban and rural areas, however, there are still 43,184 (6%) of those using the broadband who do not have access to good quality broadband. The vast majority (40,244) are in rural areas. The availability of faster services, not just in NI but right across the UK, is lower in rural areas.</li> <li>• Telecommunications is a reserved matter, which has not been devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive but is controlled centrally by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in London. Under the Communications Act 2003, the DfE has limited powers to intervene where there is evidence of market failure but this has to be undertaken with caution in order to avoid distortion of the market and comply with European regulations.</li> <li>• Project Stratum, which is being led by DfE, provides for a £165 million (including £15 million funding from DAERA) broadband rollout scheme in NI. This scheme seeks to improve connectivity for those unable to access broadband services of at least 30 megabits per second (Mbps). It is anticipated that around 76,000 premises, primarily in rural areas, are eligible for potential intervention as Project Stratum rolls out. The deployment phase is to run to 2023/24.</li> </ul>

Category	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration could be given to utilising UK wide supporting solutions, which provide a minimum of 30 Mbps to all rural premises that, may fall outside of Project Stratum intervention areas. Such solutions could include:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ The UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Rural Gigabit Connectivity scheme;</li> <li>~ The City and Regional Growth Deals for NI covering all Council areas which include plans for digital projects;</li> <li>~ Shared Rural Network, which will see improvements to mobile communications services across the UK, including rural areas of NI.</li> <li>~ The UK Government Budget announced on 11 March 2020 committed £5billion to support the rollout of gigabit-capable broadband in the most difficult to reach 20% of the country.</li> <li>~ The broadband universal service obligation (USO) implemented across the UK from March 2020 provides people in the UK the right to request a decent and affordable broadband connection. Under the USO, eligible homes and businesses will be able to request a connection. The connection is only provided free of charge where the cost of doing so is no more than £3,400.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Access</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Digital Inclusion</b> - digital inclusion means not only having access to internet connectivity but also the skills, motivation and trust to go online with confidence. Digital inclusion initiatives that address these key elements can help those that are excluded to reap the benefits of the internet that many take for granted, e.g. reducing social isolation, improving independence, financial inclusion and better quality of life. This is already a priority for FFNI and the Rural Councils.</li> <li>• Investment in education is necessary to ensure people are trained to use digital services. This is true for businesses and residents, and particularly older people should be targeted to learn how to use online services, and how to use it as a tool to stay connected with family and friends. Training should be delivered locally, preferably in libraries where the infrastructure exists.</li> </ul>

The next section outlines in detail, how the Working Group developed the priority interventions under the connectivity thematic pillar.

## Development of the Priority Interventions

The Working Group interventions are framed within the context of four key elements: Transport; Connectivity; Broadband and Access to ensure successful delivery of the thematic pillar. Each element is outlined in more detail below:

- **Transport** - Ensure transport provisions adequately connect areas across NI. This supports 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. A number of areas will need to be considered such as reviewing the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act to determine if any additional organisations such as Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCO) need added to this. It could also entail signposting to transport solutions available to support rural/urban linkages as well as supporting the development of community based transport models in rural areas where Translink services are underutilised and/or have limited coverage.
- **Connectivity** - Ensure rural people are adequately trained to use and understand the benefits of high-speed broadband. This should support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live. This could involve identifying and tackling barriers to accessing online services such as digital cost, availability of technology, skills deficit and promotion of awareness of socioeconomic benefits of digitisation. Any gaps in provision could be identified with a focus on working with stakeholders to develop an education and training package around online security and digitisation.
- **Broadband** - Ensure high quality broadband is available in rural areas. This would support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres. This could involve pilots and promotion of voucher schemes.
- **Access** - Promote remote working across NI. This could involve identifying and tackling barriers to accessing services and support innovative solutions to service provision in rural areas through collaboration with the voluntary/community sector and social economy. This could include regeneration of rural towns and villages and the piloting of socioeconomic hubs to provide enhanced access to service provision.

The following priority interventions have therefore 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.

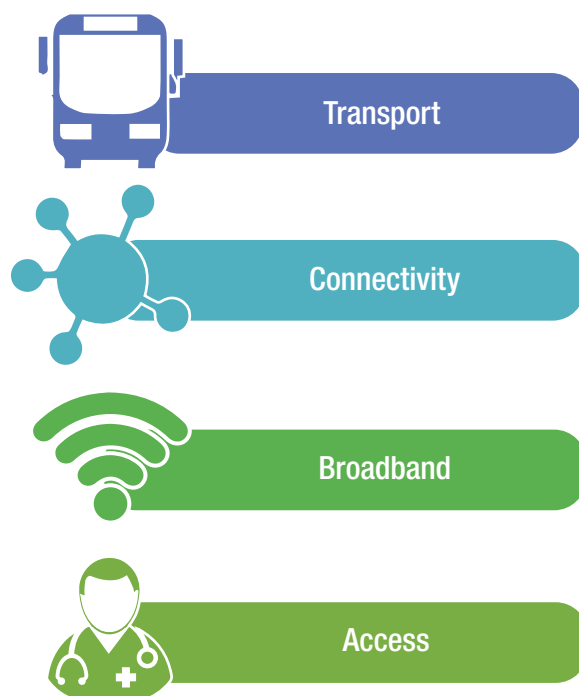
- **Intervention 3 - Broadband**

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.

The diagram below summarises the four interventions for the connectivity thematic pillar.



As the priority interventions related to connectivity fall within the policy remit of other Government Departments, they will require collaborative working.

## Stakeholder Engagement (pre-consultation)

A stakeholder event was held in January 2020 to review engagement findings across all five policy Working Groups. Overall the feedback was positive, with the proposed thematic pillars and priority areas for intervention endorsed on the day. In regards to each thematic pillar, the stakeholders were asked their views on what they agreed with; and what needed changed or was missing. The feedback received in relation to the connectivity thematic pillar from the public rural stakeholder engagement event held in January 2020 is summarised below (detailed feedback received on the day is available in Annex 15):

- The narrative should be changed about rural to enhance connectivity. Rural policy has tended to be driven by the desire to address disadvantage and to ensure rural need is addressed. A narrative change will allow a focus on the development potential of rural areas and signal that business or leisure facilities are not necessarily best placed in urban centres; and
- Connectivity was identified as central to the rural policy framework.

The next section outlines some potential implications that have since been identified due to COVID-19.

## Potential Implications of COVID-19

The Connectivity Working Group presented their evidence and findings prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To ensure that the Rural Policy Framework accurately reflects need, Working Group Members were asked in May 2020 to advise if there were any impacts on priorities previously identified or emerging issues that may need to be taken into account.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Connectivity were highlighted as follows:

- Some jobs can be done effectively remotely, whilst others cannot. Many more organisations invested in capacity and hardware and now have staff with the capability to continue remote working post-lockdown. Employees who were already IT literate were able to develop new skills quickly and utilise new platforms/technology effectively to enhance their remote working.
- Broadband connectivity is an essential public utility and the remote working/home schooling during Covid-19 has demonstrated gaps in broadband connectivity in rural NI. Areas which are missed out by Project Stratum need to be targeted with alternatives such as DCMS Gigabit voucher schemes.
- Huge potential impact on primary health services if telemedicine can be rolled out further - big issue for older people who need remote access to GP services but are delaying contact with GPs due to having to shield.
- Effect on public transport usage is likely to be suppressed if the private car and active transport (there are risks associated with cycling on rural roads) provide alternatives. People are likely to be wary of public transport for a period of time and social distancing may prove difficult both practically and economically.
- Potential in broadband hub idea in small towns/villages to foster remote working and this can also complement active transport.

Feedback outlined above indicated that no changes are required to the high level priority interventions given that the interventions are broad enough to incorporate the issues identified above.

## Public Consultation Respondent Views

In addition to the information already identified, respondents to the 2021 public consultation noted the following in relation to Connectivity:

- The pandemic has amplified the digital divide between urban and rural, particularly for victims of crime who had to access online support services.
- A need to develop programmes such as the 'Go ON NI' scheme to improve the IT maturity of users.
- Further action needed on mobile phone coverage.
- Affordable and fit for purpose access to public transport in rural areas is important. Many rural routes have been cut back or are economically unviable.
- Need for more greenways, cycle lanes and rural trails.
- 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.
- Better opportunities for geographically targeted connectivity with the water and hills, particularly in coastal areas and disabled access is needed for harbours and coastal walkways etc.
- The development of rural infrastructure must be done in a way that protects and conserves natural environment and rural communities.
- With increased demand for working from home, 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.
- Clean technology should be a key focus.
- Rural consumers need to be provided with correct information, advice and support to enable them to make the transition to net zero.
- Connectivity is 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 employers should be encouraged to keep these options available.
- There is a need to define 'sustainable'.
- Localised needs could be included in the first intervention.
- Need for collaborative working.
- Concern that if emergency services are needed, it takes much longer to reach rural areas.
- 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.

## Linkages to Programme for Government Outcomes

Connectivity contributes to four of the twelve Programme for Government outcomes as follows:

- **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; and
- **Outcome 11:** We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.

We believe that Connectivity links into the Programme for Government Outcomes outlined above as follows:

- Economic well-being, social cohesion and environmental improvements all rely in varying ways on advances in our connected infrastructure as key enablers to achieving the thematic pillar;
- Enhancing the flow of traffic on key routes between population centres will not only benefit the individual road user but also enhance economic growth and reduce environmental hotspots as a result of traffic congestion. It is a key enabler for economic growth;
- In isolation, road improvements will also drive an increase in road traffic, generating further congestion and poorer air quality. Incentivising more sustainable and efficient ways of travelling such as walking, cycling and public transport as choices will reduce traffic congestion particularly in the peak am/pm commuter period and encourage healthier, more environmentally sustainable lifestyles which will be of wider benefit; and

- Broadband availability is a core element to support economic growth and social cohesion. Economic growth can be supported through provision of superfast broadband for those premises that require it and the spread of enhanced internet speed connectivity to particular areas which currently lag behind government's vision for increased coverage across the UK.

## Conclusion

This thematic pillar considers the importance of infrastructure and connectivity between rural and urban areas and the importance of good connectivity to all aspects of rural life. From physical infrastructure and connectivity such as roads and transport links through to improvements in communications technology such as broadband and mobile coverage.





# The Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland

## Overarching Aim

The overarching aim of the Rural Policy Framework for NI is as follows:

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

## Thematic Pillars

There are five key thematic pillars that make up the Rural Policy Framework for NI as follows:

<p><b>Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 4: Employment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.</li> </ul>	

## 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) 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.

<p><b>Outcome 11:</b> We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.</p>	<p><b>Proposed Outcomes:</b> Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral;</p> <p>Our children and young people have the best start in life.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 12:</b> We give our children and young people the best start in life.</p>	<p><b>Proposed Outcome:</b> Our children and young people have the best start in life.</p>

## Priority Areas for Intervention

The Rural Policy Framework for NI will focus on nineteen priority areas for intervention. 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** - this pillar will be supported by a number supporting interventions which:

- Support and foster the rural culture of innovation;
- Raise awareness, build capacity & capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation; and
- Invest in and develop our rural economy.

**Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism** - this pillar will be supported by a number supporting interventions which:

- 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; and
- 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** - this pillar will be supported by a number supporting interventions which:

- 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 residential, social and economic centres; and
- 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** - this pillar will be supported by a number supporting interventions which:

- Promote rural prosperity by providing support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability and growth;
- Identify and address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers; and
- Invest in and develop our rural society.

**Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity** - this pillar will be supported by a number supporting interventions which:

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

## 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 rural community where people want to live, work and be active in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way. We will work towards achieving these interventions in relation to the policies, programmes and services we provide.

To test a number of assumptions emanating from the Rural Policy Framework 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.

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, TRPSI programme and the pilot schemes. 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

All Departments are collectively responsible for this Rural Policy Framework for NI. DAERA 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 on an ad hoc basis when there is a requirement to do so. 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. These screening exercises will determine whether or not a full EQIA is required.

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.

## 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 funded intervention 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.



## Annex 1 - Definitions and Terminology

### Rural

Those settlements with a population of 5,000 or less<sup>22</sup>. This equates to more than one third of the population living in rural areas. Some degree of flexibility would be recognised when considering economic activity to extend the settlement size above the recognised rural definition where this is clearly supported with a rationale.

### Entrepreneurship

Any attempt at new business or venture creation, such as self-employment, a new business organisation, or the expansion of an existing business organisation by an individual, teams of individuals or established businesses.<sup>23</sup>

### Green Growth

Green Growth means using the move from a high to a low greenhouse gas emissions economy to improve people's quality of life through green jobs and a clean environment. Green Growth means recognising and accepting the impact we have on our planet and doing something about it. Green Growth is an opportunity to kick-start Northern Ireland's recovery following the Covid-19 crisis while ensuring that the environment around us continues to provide the resources on which we all rely. The focus of Green Growth is ensuring that our natural assets can deliver their full economic potential on a sustainable basis. Our climate and environment affect all of us and we all need to take individual responsibility and consider how our own actions impact the environment.<sup>24</sup>

### Innovation

The successful generation and exploitation of new ideas. It is about transforming creative thinking into new products, new and improved processes and technologies to support new ways of doing business<sup>25</sup>. Rural innovation can take many different forms, including (adopted from NESTA<sup>26</sup>):

- **Collaborative Innovation** the establishment of learning networks, strategic partnerships, clustering and supply chain developments offering potential for long-term economic growth and regional competitiveness;

<sup>22</sup> NISRA (2015) Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements

<sup>23</sup> GEM - The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor definition

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/green-growth-strategy-northern-ireland-balancing-our-climate-environment-and-economy>

<sup>25</sup> Innovate NI Innovation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2025

<sup>26</sup> Considering innovation in its widest sense, the Working Group has developed the findings of the NESTA Study on 'Rural Innovation' (2007) to reflect their aspirations for innovation in Thematic Pillar 1.

- **Production Innovation:** the adoption of new processes, systems, technology and equipment to improve efficiency and productivity and actions that make positive climate related contributions;
- **Adaptive Innovation:** modifications to existing business models or processes in response to changing circumstances or market conditions;
- **Marketing/Digital Innovations:** the quick adoption and use of digital and network marketing techniques and the use of electronic media to promote and sell products into distant markets; and
- **Social Innovation:** solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources.

## Micro & Small Enterprises

A micro enterprise is typically defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons; a small enterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 50 persons.

## Social Enterprises

As businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.<sup>27</sup>

## Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is an organising principle for meeting human development goals while also sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services on which the economy and society depend.

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<sup>27</sup> DT1 (2002)

## Annex 2 - List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
<b>ACE</b>	Action for Community Employment
<b>AERA</b>	Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
<b>AFBI</b>	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
<b>AR</b>	Augmented reality
<b>ARTS</b>	Assisted Rural Travel Scheme
<b>BME</b>	Black and minority ethnics
<b>CCTV</b>	Closed-Circuit television.
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus D
<b>DAERA</b>	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
<b>DCMS</b>	Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
<b>DE</b>	Department of Education
<b>Defra</b>	Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs
<b>DfC</b>	Department for Communities
<b>DfE</b>	Department for the Economy
<b>DfI</b>	Department for Infrastructure
<b>DoH</b>	Department of Health
<b>ECT</b>	Easilink Community Transport
<b>EQIA</b>	Equality Impact Assessment
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FFNI</b>	Full Fibre Northern Ireland
<b>GB</b>	Great Britain
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GEM</b>	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
<b>GP</b>	General Practitioner
<b>GVA</b>	Gross Value Added
<b>HED</b>	Historic Environment Division
<b>INTERREG</b>	INTERREG is a series of programmes to stimulate cooperation between regions in and out of the European Union (EU), funded by the European Regional Development Fund.
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>LAG</b>	Local Action Group
<b>LEADER</b>	A local development method which has been used to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas.
<b>MARA</b>	Maximising Access to Services, Grants and Benefits in Rural Areas
<b>Mbps</b>	Megabits per Second

Abbreviation	Explanation
<b>NESTA</b>	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
<b>NHSCT</b>	Northern Health and Social Care Trust
<b>NI</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>NIHF</b>	Northern Ireland Hotels Federation
<b>NIRD</b>	Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme
<b>NIRWN</b>	Northern Ireland Regional Women's Network
<b>NISRA</b>	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Association
<b>NITHCO</b>	Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company
<b>Ofcom</b>	The Office of Communications
<b>PEACE PLUS</b>	A EU cross-border programme that contributes to a more prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland. The programme achieves this by funding activities that promote peace and reconciliation and contribute to the cross-border economic and territorial development of the region. It builds upon previous PEACE and INTERREG Programmes.
<b>PfG</b>	Programme for Government
<b>PHA</b>	Public Health Authority
<b>RCN</b>	Rural Community Network
<b>RDP</b>	Rural Development Programme
<b>RISP</b>	Regional Infrastructure Support Programme
<b>RoI</b>	Republic of Ireland
<b>RSN</b>	Rural Support Network
<b>RTF</b>	Rural Transport Fund
<b>RWPAP</b>	Rural White Paper Action Plan
<b>SIA</b>	Security Industry Authority
<b>SIB</b>	Strategic Investment Board
<b>SM</b>	Service Mark
<b>SME</b>	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
<b>SOA</b>	Super Output Area
<b>STEM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
<b>SUSE+</b>	Step Up to Sustainable Employment
<b>TEA</b>	Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity
<b>TIFF</b>	Total Income from Farming
<b>TRPSI</b>	Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UNWTO</b>	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>USO</b>	Universal Service Obligation
<b>VICE (model)</b>	Visitors, Industry, Community, and Environment
<b>VR</b>	Virtual Reality

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## Annex 4 - Organisations Represented at Engagement Event Held on 16 January 2020

### List of attendees

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)</li> <li>• Alliance Party</li> <li>• Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council</li> <li>• Ards and North Down Borough Council</li> <li>• Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council Southern Organisation for Action in Rural Areas (SOAR) Local Action Group (LAG)</li> <li>• Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council</li> <li>• Causeway Coast and Glens Local Action Group (LAG)</li> <li>• Centre for Cross Border Studies</li> <li>• College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)</li> <li>• Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ)</li> <li>• Community Organisations of South Tyrone &amp; Areas Ltd (COSTA)</li> <li>• County Armagh Community Development</li> <li>• County Down Rural Community Network</li> <li>• Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)</li> <li>• Mid and East Antrim Local Action Group (LAG)</li> <li>• Department for Communities (DfC)</li> <li>• Department for Infrastructure (DfI)</li> <li>• Department for the Economy (DfE)</li> <li>• Department of Education (DE)</li> <li>• Department of Finance (DoF)</li> <li>• Derry and Strabane Council Local Action Group (LAG)</li> <li>• Disability Action</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Years</li> <li>• Easilink Community Transport</li> <li>• Enterprise NI</li> <li>• Fermanagh and Omagh District Council</li> <li>• Fermanagh Rural Community Network</li> <li>• Generating Rural Opportunities within (GROW) South Antrim</li> <li>• Invest NI</li> <li>• Lagan Rural Partnership</li> <li>• Libraries NI</li> <li>• Mid and East Antrim Borough Council</li> <li>• Rural Area Partnership in Derry (RAPID)</li> <li>• Mid Ulster District Council</li> <li>• Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership</li> <li>• MURD</li> <li>• Newcastle University</li> <li>• Newry Mourne and Down District Council</li> <li>• Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT)</li> <li>• NI Community Relations Council</li> <li>• NI Environment Link</li> <li>• Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)</li> <li>• Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)</li> <li>• Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)</li> <li>• Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)</li> <li>• Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance</li> <li>• Omagh Forum for Rural Associations</li> <li>• Outdoor Recreation NI</li> </ul> |
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**List of attendees**

- |  |  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public Health Agency</li><li>• Queen's University Belfast</li><li>• Rural Action</li><li>• Rural Action Board</li><li>• Rural Community Network (RCN)</li><li>• Rural Community Network (RCN) Board</li><li>• Rural Housing Association</li><li>• Rural Support</li><li>• SDLP</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sinn Féin</li><li>• TADA Rural Support Network</li><li>• Tourism NI</li><li>• Ulster Farmers Union (UFU)</li><li>• Ulster GAA</li><li>• Ulster Unionist Party</li><li>• Venture International</li><li>• Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster</li><li>• YouthAction Northern Ireland</li></ul> |
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## Annex 5 - Stakeholder Feedback from Engagement Event Held on 16 January 2020

The table below highlights the high level information gathered at the stakeholder event identifying a number of opportunities, gaps, links and synergies across the five thematic pillars. A number of key messages from the day are also highlighted. This information has been used to inform the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland, particularly in areas such as enhanced broadband, health provision and sustainability etc.

### Opportunities/Gaps/Links/Synergies

- **Linkages across thematic pillars** - thematic pillar 5 (connectivity - transport and communications) needs to be prioritised as it is key facilitator and a cross-cutting theme across all other pillars. Any enhancements to connectivity also needs to be affordable. It was noted that there is some crossover between thematic pillar 1 (innovation and entrepreneurship) and thematic pillar 2 (rural tourism). It was noted that the DoH needs to be involved in thematic pillar 3 (rural health and social wellbeing) given that it will have a knock-on effect on the DoH and Health Trust budgets going forward.
- **Working together** - there is a need for a cross-cutting approach across government (Departments, local government) and the wider community and voluntary sector especially in the context of no EU rural development funding. DAERA cannot deliver the framework on its own but should act as a rural champion, bringing rural stakeholders together and facilitating ongoing meaningful partnership working/collaboration. Silos should be avoided at all levels with ongoing due regard for Rural Needs in line with the Rural Needs Act. There also needs to be a common understanding as to 'what rural is'. Stakeholders noted that the framework should influence/link into the PfG as there is no mention of rural in the current draft PfG. The need for cross-border cooperation as well as synergy with UK and EU was also highlighted.
- **Sustainability** - it is important to improve rural communities in a sustainable way. There is scope for increased renewable energy and encouraging increased use of shared/public transport to help minimise any environmental issues. In relation to environment, it was suggested that linkages with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) Partnerships were needed. In regards to creating a more sustainable tourism sector, Tourism NI's 'Embrace the Giant Spirit' represents a real opportunity for branding NI.
- **Community Planning/Bottom Up Approach** - the need for a bottom-up rural community development approach was highlighted in relation to rural development. It was suggested that there should be linkages to Community Planning. Departments already must have regard for Community Plans in the exercise of their departmental functions.

### Opportunities/Gaps/Links/Synergies

- **Evidencing Need** - need should be clearly identified with best practice fully shared and disseminated (preferably real-time) to help measure gaps. The focus should be on outcomes to help determine what tools are needed to get there. There should also be a mechanism for local communities to drive their own programme based on the area's specific needs.
- **Funding/Animation/Support** - it was noted that need should be clearly identified and outlined in business cases. The requirements of funding schemes should also be carefully considered for rural areas to ensure better outcomes. Stakeholders noted that sufficient time was required to complete projects to balance the need between quality and cost. It was noted that there were many barriers in the current procurement process. The importance of pre-development and animation work was also highlighted. Stakeholders suggested that some funding should be made available for more flexible innovative funding opportunities. Stakeholders indicated that small rural businesses find it difficult to manage the grants application process and that micro businesses should be supported to scale.
- **Connectivity** - the need for improved infrastructure to improve connectivity across NI was referred to (e.g. motorways). This would help to connect people and communities.
- **Community** - involvement from the local community is important and rural community leadership could be encouraged. Safe, shared spaces and peace and reconciliation are crucial in maintaining vibrant and sustainable communities.
- **Celebrate Success/Share Best Practice** - stakeholders noted that DAERA needed to do more to promote both rural and the framework, particularly in trying to engage with the disengaged. Sharing of and disseminating best practice should be encouraged. The current Rural Development Programme achievements should also be recognised and celebrated.
- **Health and Wellbeing** - reference was made to the benefits of social prescribing and the need to support carers in the community. There is also an ageing population and it can be more difficult to access GPs in rural areas. Food poverty was another issue raised by stakeholders.
- **Planning** - stakeholders noted that rural planning policy can make it more difficult to engage in rural tourism, especially with short-term planning periods. There is also a lack of affordable rural social housing.
- Stakeholders indicated that there needed to be greater integration with the private sector when considering rural development.
- Reference was made to the need to upgrade waste water treatment plants.

### Key Messages

- There are too many agencies, which leads to confusion - there is a need for “one stop shop for advice”.
- An exit strategy with sustainable outcomes was required and that long-term support for projects was needed.
- Connectivity is key - for jobs and home working to reduce commuting and the impact on the climate. Fit for purpose Broadband is needed for modern day living and working in rural areas. If connectivity and employability are not addressed, young people will move away from rural areas and they will become unattractive places to live reducing the sustainability of rural areas and communities.
- Co-operation with other Departments and stakeholders is key with DAERA being the rural champion and influencing the PfG. There are structures already in place such as community planning which could support the framework. Details are needed on how the new framework is going to be measured.
- Rural Tourism Theme needs expanded to include Leisure, Sport & Recreation. Increased community engagement is required to use local community and history resulting in a better rural tourism offering.
- Rural areas should be viewed as something positive and actions should draw from an asset-based approach. Affordable rural social housing and Cross Border collaboration is key.
- Support for key individuals in the business and community & voluntary sector will be important.

## Annex 6 - Evidence Base Output from Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Working Group

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Challenges and Opportunities arising post EU Rural Development Programme Funding</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty particularly around future trade agreements and tariffs.</li> <li>• Impact on agri-food and farming e.g. exposure to risk.</li> <li>• Cross-border implications relating to movement of goods, people, animals and services and implications on key sectors e.g. agri-food, tourism, construction, rural villages and retail.</li> <li>• Impact on labour market particularly those sectors dependent on migrant workers with labour retention and availability becoming an increasing concern.</li> <li>• The need to be sensitive to the needs of businesses particularly in rural areas which face a unique combination of challenges was highlighted not least in terms of rural development along the border corridor with Ireland.</li> <li>• Post EU Rural Development Programme funding, there is a need to support cooperation within and between NI, Ireland and UK to maximise opportunities to access and leverage EU and International programmes in support of Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other Executive strategies and policies relevant to rural innovation and entrepreneurship</b></p>	<p><b>Economy 2030</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy 2030 is the DfE's draft industrial strategy for NI. The proposed new Industrial Strategy sets out the Department's plan to turn NI into one of the world's most innovative and competitive small advanced economies. It aims to develop a globally competitive economy on the pillars of innovation, enhanced skills and employability, an international outlook and the best economic infrastructure that can be built.</li> </ul> <p><b>Innovate NI, Innovation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2025</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This strategy aims to stimulate a step change in innovation across the economy and highlights that skills, design and collaboration between sectors locally, nationally and internationally are essential for innovation.</li> </ul>



Issues	Findings
	<p><b>DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025<sup>28</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mission of this strategy is ‘An innovation ecosystem delivering for the environment, societal wellbeing and the rural economy’. The following three pillars were also identified: Create an Innovative Culture; Provide Effective Leadership; and Enable Connectivity.</li> <li>• DAERA cite a number of barriers to innovation including availability and cost of finance, leadership, technology, research and development and creative thinking skills, risk aversion, and lack of understanding of innovation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Green Growth</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DAERA has initiated Northern Ireland’s first Environment Strategy. DAERA recognises the strategic importance of innovation in addressing the wider climate change, environmental and social challenges associated with growing and rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy.</li> <li>• Green Growth aims to transform our society towards net zero by 2050, protect and enhance our environment and deliver sustainable economic growth and will involve the development and co-design of a multi-decade Strategy and Delivery Framework.</li> </ul> <p><b>Local Government Community Planning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Local Government Districts (LGDs) have developed Community Plans. These plans have been informed by extensive consultation undertaken with local communities and stakeholders. All plans contain key priorities for economic development including actions to drive business growth, as well as supporting actions to drive rural development and regeneration. In this regard there is complementarity between the objective of Thematic Pillar 1 and the priorities of Community Planning.</li> </ul>

<sup>28</sup> DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025, available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/20.21.143%20DAERA%20Innovation%20Strategy%20Final%20%281%29.PDF>

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Practices in other jurisdictions</b></p>	<p><b>PEACE PLUS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PEACE PLUS is the new cross-border programme that will contribute to a more prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland. The programme will achieve this by funding peace and reconciliation activities, and by funding activities that contribute to North/South cross-border economic and territorial development of the region (previously funded under INTERREG). The combination of the PEACE and INTERREG type activities in a single programme is reflected in the name of the programme where ‘PLUS’ represents the inclusion of wider economic, social and environmental activities.</li> <li>• The draft regulations of the programme identify 5 policy objectives: A Smarter Europe; A Greener, Lower Carbon Europe; A More Connected Europe; A More Social Europe; and A Europe Closer to its Citizens.</li> </ul> <p><b>UK Shared Prosperity Programme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The UK will no longer receive structural funding from the EU. Structural funding is used for boosting several aspects of economic development, including support for businesses, employment and agriculture, and is administered by the different nations of the UK. In order to replace this funding, the Government has pledged to set up a Shared Prosperity Fund to “reduce inequalities between communities by raising productivity, especially in those parts of the UK whose economies are furthest behind”<sup>29</sup>.</li> </ul> <p><b>Europe 2020 Strategy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The important role of entrepreneurship as a driver of economic growth and diversification has long been recognised at European level. Entrepreneurship is a key component of the EU’s Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.</li> </ul> <p><b>11th OECD Rural Development Conference on Enhancing Rural Innovation 2018<sup>30</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This conference confirmed that rural development is essential to achieve inclusive growth. Cooperation and collaboration were identified as essential components alongside knowledge exchange, capacity building and investing in softer skills such as creativity flexibility, adaptability and collaboration.</li> </ul>

<sup>29</sup> Conservative Party, *Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future*, 18 May 2017.

<sup>30</sup> The 11th OECD Rural Development Conference on Enhancing Rural Innovation took place in Edinburgh, Scotland in April 2018 supported

Issues	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The main conclusions arising from the Conference included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Accessing international markets, funding and finding skilled workers are recurrent challenges for rural businesses. However, technology can allow business to internationalise and keep up with global trends.</li> <li>~ Some rural businesses need high amounts of capital, particularly those relating to natural resources.</li> <li>~ Rural innovation and growth occur through businesses combining resources and ideas for new ways of creating goods and services that are competitive in national and international markets. Rural leadership and entrepreneurship are critical to stimulate growth and can be influenced by public policy.</li> <li>~ Innovation does not come from isolation, but it is generated from contact and exchange with other sectors and people.</li> <li>~ Creating platforms that are inclusive to SMEs and promoting work across borders can boost the innovation process in rural areas.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Rural Services Network call for a rural strategy (2019)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was highlighted that there are significant challenges in addressing the level of entrepreneurship including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Reducing the productivity gap;</li> <li>~ Helping rural businesses (especially SMEs) to grow locally;</li> <li>~ Supporting further diversification, especially into high value-added sectors;</li> <li>~ Sustaining high streets and their businesses in rural towns; and</li> <li>~ Creating better paid and more secure jobs.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Rol - Realising our Rural Potential - Action Plan for Rural Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This action plan identified supporting enterprise and employment as one of the core pillars to improving the lives of those living and working in rural communities and included the following four key objectives: Growing and attracting enterprise; Supporting sectoral growth; Skills and innovation; and Supporting rural job seekers and protecting incomes.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p data-bbox="424 331 1366 414"><b>Royal Irish Academy’s 2018-2019 series of rural stakeholders’ consultative events</b></p> <ul data-bbox="424 443 1445 817" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="424 443 1445 817">• These events organised in association with the DRCD focused on economic development; social cohesion and sustainable communities. It identified a number of actions to assist rural entrepreneurs and businesses to diversify into new sectors including: Embed support for local enterprise; Greater coordination of support structures; Enhance rural community leader development and entrepreneurial activity; New sector potential; and Enhance Higher Education Institutions (HEI) Industry Collaboration.</li></ul>

## Annex 7 - Stakeholder Feedback for Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Thematic Pillar

### Working Group 1: Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Feedback from January 2020 Stakeholder Event

#### What do you agree with?

- **Innovation** - stakeholders agreed that developing a culture of rural innovation was key to future economic growth and a focus on innovation was welcomed. It was noted that innovation was high in the current Rural Development Programme.
- **Farm diversification** - offers huge potential (especially post- EU Rural Development Programme Funding). It should not replace farming but make it more sustainable by providing an additional income to support other members of the family and help them to remain on the farm (i.e. young people).
- **Entrepreneurs** - it was noted that females and young people should be targeted with training to develop their entrepreneurial skills. Support would also be required such as tying into education at a young age or addressing barriers such as childcare and other caring responsibilities etc.
- **Awareness/Support** - it is important to raise awareness of opportunities and potential funding for rural business through animation and publicity. It was noted that the current provision of grants for rural businesses are too prescriptive (i.e. job creation and heavily loaded with paperwork) and that going forward a focus on efficiency and profitability would be welcomed. Mentoring support is key for small businesses. Any championing role will need to ensure a joined up approach with no duplication with others providing business support.
- **Roles/Responsibilities** - the distinct roles of organisations such as Invest NI and Councils needs to be understood. In particular there should be collaborative work across both Departments and linked into the wider sector to maximise impact (e.g. TRPSI approach). Lessons should be learned from any other jurisdictions with any proposed interventions being outcomes focused.
- Good connectivity is required to facilitate the success of Thematic Pillar 1. Businesses could also be brought together in a cluster to reduce isolation.
- Finance is still a barrier for businesses and existing businesses should also be targeted. The model of the DfC town centre regeneration grant was referred to including the opportunity to provide wrap around support with any grant. There is also a key opportunity for social enterprises under this Thematic Pillar.

### What might need changed?

- **Social enterprise** - stakeholders noted that the definition of 'social economy' needs transformed and communicated, especially given that many rural organisations do not realise they are a social economy and can avail of support. Some stakeholders noted that innovation needs to be applied to the whole approach of delivering entrepreneurial support to rural dwellers. However, this was with the caveat that a balance needs to be struck between promoting innovation and supporting more traditional businesses as not all rural businesses can diversify.
- **Grant Application Process** - stakeholders noted that the application process should be user friendly. In previous programmes, the provision of grants for rural businesses were seen to be too restrictive in the requirement for job creation and also too heavily loaded with paperwork. There was also a high drop out in relation to Local Action Group (LAG) applications. Stakeholders suggested that the procurement process needs to change as it was too long. In regards to the scoring of applications, it was suggested that not just innovation but also wellbeing, mental and emotional wellbeing impacts etc., need to be scored so as to not disadvantage rural social economy enterprises.
- **Farm Diversification** - there is a need to work out how to accommodate farm diversification into public goods alongside commercial farming. There can also be difficulties between existing farm businesses and ventures such as tourism.
- **Roles/Responsibilities** - stakeholders noted that there needs to be more cross departmental working with the rural framework also resourced across departments and local government. Joined up working should also reduce any duplication of services across government (for example there should be alignment with wider planning policies and processes such as rates, connectivity). There should also be measurable outcomes linked to a strong evidence base.
- **Signposting** - stakeholders indicated that there were too many agencies and that there should be a "one stop shop for advice" (for example information available on an updated hub with appropriate signposting). It was also noted that those living in rural areas were not always aware of council boundaries.
- **Entrepreneurs** - Need to raise awareness and build capacity: need mentors, hand-holders in areas especially for women (i.e. Go for It type initiatives).
- **Awareness/Support** - Stakeholders indicated that the support needed was not always a grant. It could be for example, increased animation before devising business plans. It was noted that significant support is required in rural areas, with the need for championship roles. Volunteer-led organisations require support for accessing funding and capital grants. Also support required in coastal rural areas could be very different to that for inland rural areas.

### What might need changed?

- **Training** - there should be appropriate signposting to training programmes. It was noted that third level higher education sector buy in was required, however, apprenticeships and peer learning should also be explored.
- **Connectivity** - networking/speed of broadband key for growth and sustainability of any investment.
- Replicate urban regeneration models in rural areas and demonstrate the value of community hubs. Responsibility for service provision in rural.
- It was noted that there was a need to show the value of the previous Rural Development Programme and to secure funds for immediate interventions. Rural should also not be lost in agriculture, especially given the social value of such initiatives.

### What is missing?

- **Collaborative working** - collaboration was seen as a cross-cutting theme and that Departments need to work together. Duplication across bodies should be avoided and that there is an opportunity for better connections and relationships between business (could include Invest NI) and regional colleges including CAFRE. Links also need to be encouraged between small and large businesses to develop the supply chain in rural areas and encouraged shared learning between the businesses.
- **Shared learning** - learning needs to be taken from best practice elsewhere. There is a 'risk adverse' culture and sharing of ideas/think tank is needed to foster creativity.
- **Evidence Base** - rural evidence base is largely supported by AFBI and CAFRE but there could also be a role for Universities. It was also suggested that CAFRE needs to do more on Agri Tec/diversification/innovation.
- **Entrepreneurs** - social infrastructure needs to be sustained in order to encourage young people to remain or return to rural communities and to promote innovation (particularly in Hi-tech industries). Entrepreneurial education is required at an early age in schools. The language around entrepreneurship and innovation needs to be made more youth friendly and providers could include a rural entrepreneurship element to their training. In addition, there needs to be a focus on those who are unemployed to encourage them towards entrepreneurship. Women also need assistance as they tend to be more disproportionately affected by caring responsibilities which can block small business start-up. Leadership skills can be enhanced through for example, the Institute of Leadership and Management.

### What is missing?

- **Rural Hubs** - there is a need to consider co-working space and the setting up of local hubs to help support the sharing of ideas, innovation etc. There could be links to community and tourism hubs.
- **Planning** - planning policies often encourage people to stay in towns and cities, rather than rural areas. However, consideration needs to be given to housing, planning and community infrastructure to ensure that people remain in rural areas. This could include the availability of affordable housing (to support those who left the area to return) and signage which is more enabling to rural businesses.
- **Connectivity** - there is need for improved connectivity (transport and broadband) between urban and rural areas and the recognition of interlinkages between the two. There also needs to be a capacity to use the internet, for example, increased usage of webinars and teleconferencing could help promote entrepreneurship. It was noted that it would be interesting to determine what prevents private sector from establishing warehouses, factories and businesses in rural areas.
- **Education and Training** - there were concerns expressed about closure of rural schools with locals choosing to send children to larger schools in towns. There are opportunities to link in with Universities, Alumni Networks etc. to encourage graduates to return to rural areas, particularly in relation to sectors such as engineering. Ensuring there is a skilled and trained pool of potential employees could allow entrepreneurship to flourish. Innovation is also required in relation to apprenticeships and also highlighting to farming communities the transferrable skills they have relevant to business.
- **Innovation and Diversification** - many rural communities/farms have been resourceful in sourcing a range of incomes in innovative ways and have diversified. Innovation is needed in service delivery and consideration should be given as to why there are regional differences in levels of innovation.
- **Business Start-Up** - there are barriers to micro businesses growing and exporting. For example, Invest NI currently focuses on large businesses, export and job creation. It was suggested that more support should be available to help micro businesses to grow such as small capital grants.
- There is also a potential for greater use of renewable energy.



## Annex 8 - Evidence Base Output from Rural Tourism Working Group

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Challenges and Opportunities arising post EU Rural Development Programme Funding</b></p> <p><b>(issues identified prior to 31 January 2020)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tourism is important to the local economy. Overnight trips expenditure accounts for around 3% of regional GVA. Tourism related industries jobs account for approximately 65,000 (10%) of NI jobs.</li> <li>• The EU is a market of half a billion people with tourists visiting from mainland Europe and the RoI accounting for around a third of all external visits. Tour operators programme their business 12-18 months in advance so any real or perceived difficulties of holidaying or trade in NI could have a negative impact. Overseas tourism needs to be secured in the medium term, to ensure that NI continues to grow and does not lose market share to competitors.</li> <li>• As the sterling is weak against the currencies in target markets, it could potentially make the UK including NI, an attractive place to visit.</li> <li>• The retention of the Common Travel Area for citizens of the UK and Ireland, which is of vital importance for the continued development of tourism to NI, is to be welcomed. There is reliance on ease of access to and from RoI for overseas visitors who enter NI via the Republic and for the many tourism projects that employ staff from RoI.</li> <li>• At present around 20% of workers in the local tourism and hospitality sector come from outside of NI. Any new regulations on their mobility and right to reside and work could have a negative impact exacerbating the existing skills deficiencies in the sector and further hindering the planned expansion of local tourism.</li> <li>• Air access is a key enabler for inbound tourism growth. NI is heavily reliant on-air routes in maintaining existing services and attracting new destinations that will bring greater numbers of inbound visitors.</li> <li>• The body of evidence published by the EU, Government (NI and UK) suggests that the potential impacts of a No Deal exit could be wide ranging across the NI economy, at a more significant rate than the UK as a whole given the proximity to the land border with RoI, and with certain sectors and areas within the region hit hardest.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Other Executive strategies and policies relevant to sustainable rural tourism.</b></p>	<p><b>Economy 2030</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy 2030 is the DfE’s draft industrial strategy for NI. The proposed new Industrial Strategy sets out the Department’s plan to turn NI into one of the world’s most innovative and competitive small advanced economies. It aims to develop a globally competitive economy on the pillars of innovation, enhanced skills and employability, an international outlook and the best economic infrastructure that can be built.</li> </ul> <p><b>Regional Development Strategy 2035</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 provides the regional policy context and aims to protect and enhance the environment for current and future generations.</li> <li>• Regional Guidance 4 (RG4) of the Strategy promotes a sustainable approach to the provision of tourism infrastructure. Investment in tourism brings new facilities to NI’s towns and provides the opportunities to get maximum benefit from our wealth of environmental and heritage assets: our waterways, landscapes, coastline and built heritage. There are also health benefits to be gained by a more active resident population who are motivated to be out and about exploring NI’s tourism assets.</li> <li>• Regional Guidance 11 (RG11) sets out to conserve, protect and where possible, enhance NI’s built heritage and natural environment. It also aims to maintain and establish ecological networks and suggests that such networks could be of amenity value if linked to the green infrastructure provided by walking and cycle routes to heritage and other recreational interest.</li> </ul> <p><b>Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The objective of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) is to further sustainable development and improve the well-being of the people of NI. The SPPS looks at a number of subject areas including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ <b>Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation:</b> The SPPS recognises that open space, sport and outdoor recreation is important to society now and in the future and states that everyone should have easy access to open space and outdoor recreational activity or simply enjoy and have contact with nature;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p>~ <b>Natural Heritage:</b> The SPPS states that NI's natural heritage provides a wide range of opportunities for enjoyment, recreation and sustainable economic activities;</p> <p>~ <b>Tourism:</b> One of the aims in relation to tourism development is to manage the provision of sustainable and high-quality tourism developments in appropriate locations within the natural environment. The regional strategic objectives include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitate sustainable tourism development in an environmentally sensitive manner;</li> <li>- Contribute to the growth of the regional economy by facilitating tourism growth;</li> <li>- Utilise and develop the tourism potential of settlements by facilitating tourism developments of an appropriate nature, location and scale; and</li> <li>- Ensure a high standard of quality and design for all tourism development.</li> </ul> <p>• <b>Development in the Countryside:</b> The aim of the SPPS with regards to the countryside is to manage development in a manner which strikes a balance between protection of the environment from inappropriate development, while supporting and sustaining rural communities consistent with the Regional Development Strategy 2035.</p> <p>Addressing legislative barriers such as accessing public rights of way to ensure the creation of long distance public walks and trails, also needs future consideration.</p> <p><b>Belfast City Region Deal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belfast City Region Deal, with an anticipated total investment of over £1 billion, has identified tourism and regeneration as one of four key investment pillars, alongside infrastructure; innovation and digital; and employability and skills. The deal identifies the opportunity for a step change in the tourism offering, delivering a series of internationally visible tourism products that 'will extend the tourist route from Belfast through Carrickfergus, towards the Causeway Coast and Glens, and along Ards and North Down and into the Mourne Mountains'.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Practices in other jurisdictions.</b></p>	<p><b>UK Tourism Sector Deal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The UK's Industrial Strategy has identified tourism as one of 10 sectors in need of particular focus through the Sector Deal. The Sector Deal is forward thinking and has a particular focus on five key areas, namely: Ideas (including creation of a tourism data hub); People (including creation of 10,000 apprenticeships by 2025); Infrastructure (including developing 130,000 bedrooms by 2025, and investment in attractions and innovations. Development of its Maritime and Aviation strategies); Place (including piloting five new Tourism Zones to support the ambition to make the UK the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025 - areas will become Tourism Zones via a bidding process; receiving targeted support from government if successful); and Business environment (including a Business Events Action Plan 2019-25). Work is currently ongoing with the UK Government regarding which components of the Sector Deal should/can apply in NI.</li> <li>• While tourism is a devolved power within Northern Ireland, the British Tourist Authority has responsibility for marketing Britain worldwide and developing its visitor economy. The UK Government is liaising with the devolved nations on future work and identifying projects the devolved governments would like to partner in.</li> </ul>

## Annex 9 - Stakeholder Feedback for Rural Tourism Thematic Pillar

### Working Group 2: Rural Tourism Feedback from January 2020 Stakeholder Event

#### What do you agree with?

- **Community buy-in** - the importance of buying in community ownership was recognised rather than opposition to tourism developments. Local community development tourism could be more profitable, however, there needs to be consideration of how tourism is going to be sustainable and benefit those living locally.
- **Types of Tourist Attractions** - it was suggested that current attractions should be exploited more, for example, a focus on outdoor activities/natural assets (e.g. cycling trails, walking, and guided tours) would draw tourists to rural areas. Reference was also made to co-ordination around food/crafts etc. Whilst a limited number of “signature projects” are important, there is also an opportunity to maintain and develop local attractions (for locals in the off-season) but with enough to attract out of state visitors in holiday season.
- **Environment** - a balance is needed in terms of protection of the environment and the need to put in place appropriate infrastructure to support tourism in rural areas. For example, the Dark Hedges was cited as an example where protecting the local environment whilst attracting visitors can be difficult.
- **Opportunities Post EU Rural Development Programme** - it is difficult to know, particularly in terms of land use and subsidies to farmers, whether or not rural tourism will be seen as an opportunity or challenge.
- **Skills development** - agreed that people need skills built to be able to deliver on new ideas for tourism businesses.
- Central & Local Government need to show leadership, working in partnership with other key stakeholders, including the private and community sectors. It was noted that DfE also needs to be committed to it.

#### What might need changed?

- **Cultural Identity** - stakeholders noted that tourist attractions should highlight the cultural identity (i.e. music, sports, storytelling, food and history) across NI (not just in the cities).
- **Domestic Tourism** - Not all visitors are out of country with domestic tourism, especially with weekends ‘staycations’, still valuable. Domestic tourism tends to be more leisurely with people stopping to spend time and money in local craft shops and cafes (potentially linking into thematic pillar 1 on innovation and entrepreneurship). However, day trippers are less likely to spend money than those who stay overnight.

### What might need changed?

- **Specific Locations** - Natural resources such as the lakes, West of the Bann could be promoted. Areas such as Belleek have the potential to appeal globally. Areas such as the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East could be utilised to draw international tourists who enter through Dublin across the border into rural NI.
- **Adventure/activity Tourism** - this allows the use of natural assets in rural areas and has a dual purpose of promoting local health and wellbeing initiatives. Out of state visitors also need 1-2 weeks of activities to keep them in a region.
- **Marketing/Awareness Raising** - a cultural shift is needed by working with local rural communities to embrace tourists and tourism and understand the target audience. Small businesses may struggle to finance marketing, so there may need to be a subsidised method of marketing the tourism offering. For example, a one stop website would allow tourists to see a range of attractions in an area which may result in them staying longer than a few hours. In order to make NI more prominent for global visitors, there needs to be a joined up approach between Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI.
- **Connectivity** - there needs to be a balance struck between increased visitor numbers and maintaining the environment and local economy. Sufficient infrastructure needs to be in place to support attractions and particularly linkages between urban and rural areas. Any changes to infrastructure needs to be managed sensitively to ensure 'buy in' from local communities.
- **Large vs Small Tourism Attractions** - the regional spread attractions is very important. Stakeholders indicated that the current Tourism Strategy focused on signature projects and that smaller attractions should also be promoted (even if rural experiences are clustered together). The length of the tourism season should be increased where possible.
- **Partnership Working** - stakeholders noted that partnership working was needed with local communities ensuring a bottom up approach where communities are not overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing a tourist attraction. Connections are also needed with organisations such as the National Trust and any tourist attraction should benefit the local rural community.
- **Barriers** - it was noted that barriers to farmers diversifying should be addressed. For example, there is a lot of regulation and the procurement process is lengthy/difficult.
- Stakeholders noted that capacity needs to be built up and significant support provided to those in rural areas. Best practice learning should also be taken into account from other areas (i.e. Culcaigh Way).

### What is missing?

- **Accommodation** - there has been an increased demand for Airbnb facilities in rural areas. Airbnb accommodation is unregulated and tends to undercut other accommodation providers. This puts the NITB approved accommodation at a greater risk which has stringent requirements to meet. There needs to be a sufficient regional balance of various types of accommodation to encourage tourists to stay longer in a rural region. There is also an opportunity for agri-tourism - i.e. development of rural accommodation on farms as an agricultural activity. A barrier to developing rural accommodation is the rates aspect, particularly if there is only going to be a very short tourist season.
- **Promotion and Awareness** - market research and branding is important to understand the visitor profile. In addition to marketing NI as a whole (i.e. encouraging the weekend tour of the Game of Thrones, Lakes etc.), year round local marketing should be maximised. Awareness raising opportunities may be needed to ensure people get all the information they need (i.e. where nearest coffee or gift shops are).
- **Infrastructure/Connectivity** - infrastructure is important (real and virtual). The use of technology, especially apps can help tourists to know what is available in particular areas including where to stay and what else to do. In regards to transport, it can be difficult to access rural areas without a car, there is a need to be able to move across NI more easily. The continued links across the border can be maximised upon to attract tourists from the RoI. Stakeholders also noted that Greenways and trails were important and that there was a need for a major project investment which has good infrastructure all year round (e.g. Eden/Center Parcs). There are also linkages to thematic pillar 5.
- **Environment** - stakeholders noted that there needs to be a focus on the environmental impact, including any carbon footprint issues of tourism to local areas. Any tourism should be sustainable and there is potential to explore the activity and environmental tourism market. Blue and Green ways could also be more strategically developed.
- **Types of tourism** - stakeholders referred to many types of tourism which could be considered such as: community led festivals; agricultural shows; food producers in small villages; social economy; activity tourism (i.e. encouraging people outside with forest trails etc.); diversity playparks; golf; coastal tourism; tourist hubs; and maximising on cruise ships.
- **Partnership/Collaborative Working** - co-ordination and partnership is key. Stakeholders noted that there needed to be a joined up inter-departmental and local government approach to tourism. Also there should be a platform for collaboration in rural communities to pull together the tourism offering for a particular area and provide information to visitors.
- **Skills** - there is a shortage in skills sets (e.g. skilled waiters). There is a need to ensure a supply of workers and link into training to ensure customer care to enhance experiences.

### What is missing?

- **Statistics** - there is a need to understand the visitors (both internal and external) and what they need. A single source of information to identify any gaps between provision and demand which drills down to rural areas would be useful.
- **Planning/regulation** - planning policies can make rural tourism difficult. There are also issues with active farming requirements which can stop individuals accessing support.
- **Rural Communities** - there is a need to ensure that rural communities benefit from the tourism product. For example, locals may not be able to afford properties in local tourist areas (suggestion for something like 'Barcelona Laws'). There also needs to be a link to Community Plans with the councils driving forward any rural tourism strategy. Rural communities can become champions for their own areas.
- **Financial Support** - resource support is also required to keep capital projects sustainable.
- Stakeholders noted that rural areas need to be both accessible and affordable to encourage families to visit.
- Learning should be taken on board (e.g. how the Wild Atlantic Way managed the flow of visitors).



## Annex 10 - Evidence Base Output from Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Working Group

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Challenges and Opportunities arising post EU Rural Development Programme Funding</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a lack of clarity around the challenges and opportunities post EU Rural Development Programme for rural dwellers, and the farming community in particular. There is a potential for increased mental and emotional wellbeing issues in rural communities. This creates a need to prepare the farming community in particular and highlights the need for ongoing support and scope through mechanisms such as Rural Support to address emerging issues.</li> <li>• In particular, there are challenges associated with rural border communities who will be impacted across a range of issues, including access to services and employment and community cohesion. A strategic approach will be required to support rural border communities adapt to these challenges, working with local delivery organisations and promoting potential for joint working, including opportunities such as PEACE PLUS programme funding.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other Executive strategies and policies relevant to rural social wellbeing</b></p>	<p><b>DAERA Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The TRPSI Framework led by DAERA aims to promote the development of new and innovative approaches to tackle poverty and social isolation among vulnerable rural people. TRPSI provides an opportunity to do the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Encourage joint working with statutory and community and voluntary sector partners, including inter-departmental collaboration;</li> <li>~ Supports rural health and wellbeing and increasing access to services, including better use of the rural estate;</li> <li>~ Promotes social inclusion and community cohesion by providing space and opportunity for rural dwellers to interact;</li> <li>~ Targets resources and support to the most deprived rural areas; and</li> <li>~ Supporting grass roots rural community development to reach those most at risk.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p>The New Decade New Approach agreement (January 2020) determined that a timetable for development and delivery of key policies would be published. Engagement with Civic Society and the principles of co-design and co-production must underpin the development of PfG and its associated budget and strategies. A co-design and co-production approach will be embedded from the outset of the development of an anti-poverty and child poverty strategy and other strategies which DfC is responsible for example Active Ageing, Disability, Sexual Orientation, Gender. Those strategies most applicable to the Rural Health and Social Wellbeing thematic pillar are referenced below in their current status:</p> <p><b>Child Poverty Strategy - NI Executive (March 2016)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The strategy aims to reduce the number of children in poverty and to reduce the impact of poverty on children focusing on economic wellbeing, health, education and safe, secure and stable environments. This strategy has been extended until 2022 as there may be scope to take it forward under a wider anti-poverty strategy.</li> </ul> <p><b>Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister - Together: Building a United Community Strategy (TBUC)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The aim of the strategy is to build ‘a united community where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.’</li> </ul> <p><b>Draft Protect Life 2: 2017</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Protect Life strategy aims to reduce the differential in the suicide rate between deprived and non-deprived areas. It recognises the unique circumstances experienced in rural areas in recent years including an ageing population, decline in farm incomes, changing labour markets, and depopulation/migration in some areas. An enhanced cross-departmental approach is reflected in the revised strategy and contains actions falling to departments other than Health. These include the community sector delivering positive mental and emotional wellbeing messages and identifying specific interventions which improve mental and emotional wellbeing.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p><b>Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together - a ten-year road map for the transformation of Health and Social Care services in Northern Ireland</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The roadmap envisages a future society where “people are supported to keep well in the first place with the information, education and support to make informed choices and take control of their own health and wellbeing.” The focus is on person centred care, which is delivered in a range of environments, including community facilities and where partnership and collaboration are to the fore.</li> </ul> <p><b>Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Making Life Better 2013-2023</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making Life Better is the strategic framework for public health. It is designed to provide direction for policies and actions to improve the health and well being of people in NI and to reduce health inequalities.</li> <li>Key thematic areas such as “Creating the Conditions” and “Empowering Communities” seek to address the wider conditions impacting on health at population level, and within local communities and will align with key government strategies such as those to develop the economy, tackle poverty and promote community relations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Practices in other jurisdictions/ Evidence &amp; Research Base</b></p>	<p><b>Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2022</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The strategy recognises the positive contribution older people make to society and seeks to provide an active ageing framework which welcomes and values older people, recognising that the number of older people in NI is continuing to increase.</li> </ul> <p><b>Education Authority Youth Service - Research into Needs of Rural Young People (2019)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The research highlighted the importance of access to services, including the school estate in rural areas. It was noted that such access should include evening and weekend provision. Compliance with the Rural Needs Act was also noted, reflective of the particular needs of rural communities and the particular forms of deprivation and disadvantage, including access to services, which are faced by rural communities.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p><b>Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport - A Connected Society - A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness (2018)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This strategy recognises that loneliness can impact on anyone and its consequences can be highly damaging to our health. It also notes that advances in society, including remote working and online activity, can serve to increase a sense of loneliness. The importance of community infrastructure in empowering social connections was highlighted, including making better use of community spaces, and working with transport providers to increase access.</li> </ul> <p><b>Bringing People Together: how community action can tackle loneliness and social isolation - Community Fund (2019)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The report highlights the difference between being alone and feeling lonely, recognising the importance of connections to mental and emotional wellbeing and enabling people to re-engage. It also acknowledges that there are a variety of triggers for loneliness and the need for support for people at vulnerable times in their lives.</li> </ul> <p><b>Loneliness in Northern Ireland 2019/20 - NISRA</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While NISRA found that people in urban areas were “more often lonely” it also noted that deprivation is a factor, with people in most deprived areas being “more often lonely.” People without internet access or access to a car were more likely to be “more often lonely” than those with access, highlighting two key challenges for rural dwellers. People in the 16-24 and 75+ age groups were “more often lonely”.</li> </ul>

## Annex 11 - Stakeholder Feedback for Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Thematic Pillar

### Working Group 3: Rural Health and Wellbeing Feedback from January 2020 Stakeholder Event

#### What do you agree with?

- **Making Best Use of Existing Assets/Structures and Funding** - stakeholders agreed that better use should be made of existing rural assets and resources and that there should not be duplication of existing resources. There should be a mix of clearly identifiable funding streams to maintain/sustain any rural infrastructure (e.g. grant aid could enable basic refurbishment or repairs of halls/schools). Examples of making better use of assets included opening schools out of hours; using community premises for activities when empty; and promoting libraries as a centre for home working activities. Additionally there needs to be a strategic approach to funding of community buildings and healthy living centres through for example, options of support for social enterprise delivery of services. It was noted that there were concerns if budget pressures would result in the centralisation of services or cutting of services in rural areas.
- **TRPSI Approach** - there was positive feedback and support for the existing TRPSI schemes (e.g. Rural Support/Farm Family Health van). Stakeholders noted that there was a need to sustain and develop a similar approach to Health and Wellbeing related services in rural areas under the new Framework.
- **Village regeneration** - villages are key to local service delivery and village plans should be built upon. A multi-sectoral approach is required such as linkages to PEACE PLUS. Consideration needs to be given to derelict buildings (e.g. Bushmills cited as an example where tourism but village needs regenerated). Stakeholders noted that the scope of the public sector was limited with the private sector disinvesting by closing banks/post offices/pubs etc. There is a need to repurpose retail buildings in smaller settlements.
- **Partnership Working** - the need for an integrated joined up partnership/networking approach was highlighted (across Departments and local government). The importance of linking into Community Planning and a focus on sharing best practice across regions was also noted.
- **Health and wellbeing** - stakeholders noted that it was good that social and economic factors were being taken into account given the impact on wellbeing across all groups. Rural areas whilst quiet can be isolated when someone tries to access services and loneliness can be an issue. The benefits of telehealth, innovation and social prescribing were highlighted.

### What do you agree with?

- **Rural Transport** - stakeholders noted that DfI have made cuts and that public transport is not fully utilised. Service provision is important to keep people in rural areas, especially with issues getting access to transport.
- **Community** - It was noted that local ownership was important to enable local solutions to problems. Whilst communities should be central and volunteers have an important role, not all services can be volunteer led. Succession planning also needs to be taken into account with appropriate resources (i.e. paid mentors for rural support).

### What might need changed?

- **Reducing rural isolation** - this should focus on younger as well as older people including farmers and new parents. Stigma should be reduced around mental and emotional wellbeing issues and could be done via engagement; mental health support including suicide prevention; support groups for those who feel lonely; encouraging the use and provision of outreach services. Earlier intervention work may lead to better outcomes for local communities (e.g. early mental and emotional wellbeing intervention work may reduce the burden on expensive health services at a later date).
- **Connectivity** - lack of access to broadband should be addressed to ensure that it doesn't create greater isolation. Digital means should be explored to bring excluded people in. Access to rural transport is also a key barrier which needs addressed.
- **Volunteers** - volunteering should be supported given how important grass roots community and voluntary groups are to the delivery of services for this thematic pillar. Community and voluntary groups need to be properly resourced to deliver initiatives on the ground. A recruitment drive of community volunteers is also needed or a new approach to make such roles more attractive to ensure that responsibility does not fall on the same group of people, leading to possible burn out.
- **Rural assets** - best use should be made of existing rural assets, particularly in regards to a rural outreach element. For example, churches, schools, halls could be used to provide additional out of hours facilities on a cross-community basis. This recognises the potential for the rural estate to be utilised for the promotion of inclusion and wellbeing. Adjustments may be needed to the planning system to accommodate such delivery of services.
- **Support** - any support provided should be driven by need and not funding/capacity. For example, if volunteering is not strong in a particular rural area this may need to be targeted. Training may need to be provided to increase the capacity of community and voluntary organisations. Longer term wrap around support post grant-aid will also be needed (stakeholders suggested the Maximising Access programme could be funded again).

### What might need changed?

- **Collaborative working** - there should be better co-ordination and cross development multi-agency partnerships. For example, support for villages could be for wider rural areas with central hubs. It was also suggested that collaborative work was needed for digital purposes such as Universal Credit applications.

### What is missing?

- **Joined up approach** - there needs to be collaborative working across departments and local government. Many stakeholders noted that the DoH should take the lead for this thematic pillar supported by DAERA focusing on the most rural issues. Collaboration will provide a mechanism to share best practice and linkages should also be made to community planning.
- **Funding** - stakeholders noted that funding should be available from a range of sources (not just DAERA) and that any funding should be protected. The funding should also be accessible to small groups in rural areas.
- **Connectivity** - stakeholders noted that this thematic pillar is dependent upon delivery of the connectivity thematic pillar with a need for better broadband and rural transport provision. In order to optimise technology, there is a need for an innovative approach to connectivity of people and communities. Training on how to access online services and use up to date technology such as Alexa and Portal is needed.
- **Identifying need** - stakeholders indicated that a mapping exercise was required to determine what health initiatives were being delivered in rural areas. This would ensure no duplication of service delivery.
- **Shared spaces** - rural assets need to be shared, vibrant and safe spaces available to all abilities/ages/needs within the community. Any division within rural areas can contribute to isolation.
- **Hubs** - a community hall can act as a hub for economic/training/education purposes etc. and can also facilitate outreach facilities.
- **Health and Wellbeing programmes** - stakeholders noted that existing infrastructure (people and buildings) should be built upon to support good mental and emotional wellbeing for all client groups. For example, use of walking trails/hiking; schools; GAA facilities; leisure centres. Social prescribing and social farming have potential to promote health and wellbeing in rural areas. The importance of intergenerational programmes was also referred to and stakeholders noted that carers required more support such as access to affordable transport. Specific events for isolated farmers were also suggested.

### What is missing?

- **Voluntary and community sector** - it was noted that community groups should have the capacity to apply directly for grants. In regards to volunteers, succession planning and innovative approaches are required to engage people in volunteering activity. In particular, young people should be encouraged to take up such roles. Sufficient resources and running costs are required to empower people to volunteer. There is also potential for alternative business models such as social enterprises.
- **Housing/Planning** - in rural areas, affordable housing and accessible planning is needed to help keep young people in these areas ensuring that communities remain vibrant.



## Annex 12 - Evidence Base Output from Rural Employment Working Group

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Challenges and Opportunities arising from post EU Rural Development Programme Funding, particularly in border communities</b></p>	<p>There is potential for disproportionate effects on rural areas given the prevalence of cross border activity in the agriculture and agri-food production industries and the importance of EU funding within rural areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Border issues</b> - there were a number of challenges identified in regards to the border between NI and RoI and what would happen post EU as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Any customs checks at the border would be felt most immediately in the rural communities that surround the border;</li> <li>~ Differing standards of regulation on either side of the border with implications for the implementation of environmental policy and initiatives. If policies cannot be easily implemented locally, it could lead to serious risks for the local environment;</li> <li>~ People crossing the border to go to work could be impacted and the impact on cross border trade, opportunities for collaboration and innovation and the competitiveness and productivity of agriculture and other business is likely to be significant.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>EU Funding</b> - agriculture and rural areas have benefitted from EU Funding of approximately £350 million per year. Farming which is important to the NI economy is subsidised directly through the Common Agricultural Policy. Equally the Priority 6 and RDP programmes have been important to rural areas and the policy instruments used to replace them will be critical to the continued sustainability of rural areas.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other Executive strategies and policies relevant to training and employment</b></p>	<p><b>Graduating to Success (2012) - A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This strategy aims to improve rural access to higher education, in partnership with the higher education and further education sectors and is committed to supporting accessibility within higher education through a range of actions, including improving access to higher education in rural areas (i.e. by offering wider geographical access to higher education, potentially through establishment of learning and study facilities at Further Education Colleges).</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scope exists for a range of actions including working with partners to better connect rural dwellers to higher and further education through hosting of information events and exploring potential for outreach education.</li> </ul> <p><b>Department for Infrastructure’s Regional Development Strategy 2035</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition to its Society theme which sets out a goal to “support urban and rural renaissance,” the strategy has aims which include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supporting strong, sustainable growth for the benefit of all parts of NI;</li> <li>- Supporting towns, villages and rural communities to maximise their potential.</li> <li>- Increasing employment opportunities for people living in rural areas will be central to plans to regenerate villages and rural communities, including supporting outreach and remote working.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Invest NI Business Strategy 2017-2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest NI’s ambition over the lifespan of this strategy is to contribute to the outcomes of the draft Programme for Government by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supporting and encouraging 30,000 - 40,000 additional jobs;</li> <li>- Increasing business expenditure on research and development by £160-£200 million;</li> <li>- Supporting customers to increase their total sales by £3.2 - £4.2 billion.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• To do this, Invest NI will focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Embedding innovation and entrepreneurship to support more businesses with high growth potential start-up and scale up;</li> <li>- Helping more businesses successfully sell outside NI;</li> <li>- Attracting more quality inward investors; and</li> <li>- Selling NI globally in a much wider context.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Department for Economy (Formerly Department Enterprise Trade and Investment) Draft Innovation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013 - 2025</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The draft Strategy identifies actions under four themes: Knowledge Generation; Knowledge Exchange; Knowledge Exploitation; and Cultural Change. Its vision is: “Northern Ireland, by 2025, will be recognised as an innovation hub and will be one of the UK’s leading high-growth, knowledge based regions which embraces creativity and innovation at all levels of society”.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
	<p><b>Community Planning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amongst aims and priorities identified by Community Planning Partnerships which are relevant to Rural Policy Thematic Pillar 4 are:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouraging enterprise and innovation, including pre-enterprise support and the enhancement of the level of local business start-ups;</li> <li>- Upskilling and initiatives addressing skills shortages;</li> <li>- Availability of placements, internships and apprenticeships; building links between business and education sectors;</li> <li>- Respecting the character of rural areas and complying with planning policy;</li> <li>- Supporting the further growth and development of existing sectors such as Agri-Food, Manufacturing, Engineering and Tourism, all of which have much to offer rural communities and economies;</li> <li>- Development of strategic infrastructure and digital connectivity;</li> <li>- Support for social enterprise; and</li> <li>- Support for Micro and Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) across all sectors.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Annex 13 - Stakeholder Feedback for Rural Employment Thematic Pillar

### Working Group 4: Rural Employment Feedback from January 2020 Stakeholder Event

#### What do you agree with?

- **Childcare** - stakeholders noted that investment in both affordable and accessible childcare was required in rural areas to facilitate parents in gaining employment. Issues were also raised in relation to a lack of free pre-school nursery places for children and wrap around childcare in rural communities given the distances families would have to travel.
- **Transport** - lack of accessible rural transport is a key barrier in gaining employment. If there was a more balanced regional development of the economy, reliance on cars for commuting from rural areas could be reduced, also lessening the negative impact on the environment.
- **Education and skills** - stakeholders noted that education provision needs to be better aligned with business needs. For example, schools and colleges should plan ahead to ensure that any local skills gap is addressed (e.g. engineering, tourism) by building good relationships with local businesses. Young rural dwellers also need to be made aware of the opportunities available locally. Outreach provision from colleges would be of benefit as well as promotion of digital skills to facilitate those remote working. Libraries would also have a role to play.
- **Support for businesses** - support is required for both existing and new rural businesses (both financial and upskilling to bring expertise to local communities). The majority of stakeholders noted that support is specifically required for non-farming rural enterprises given the impact of loss of EU funding on farmers and the need for sustainability in rural areas. High speed broadband is also needed to help rural businesses to work from home and to help with their online marketing of business.

#### What might need changed?

- **Connectivity/Rural Hubs** - stakeholders noted that access to appropriate infrastructure (i.e. roads, public transport, broadband and digital hubs) is required to make rural areas a viable option for businesses to relocate to. To date, the development of service hubs has tended to focus on towns and villages. There is potential to regenerate rural derelict buildings into hubs to contribute to employment opportunities (including hotdesking) and to reduce the need for long commutes to work whilst alleviating stress and ill mental health of rural dwellers. Stakeholders also suggested that successful urban businesses could perhaps go rural.

### What might need changed?

- **Flexible working** - stakeholders noted that flexible working arrangements (such as home working, different hours, one to one support to disabled employees) were needed within government and other employers. It was suggested that the location of the office could put people off applying for promotions and alternative roles.
- **Linkages between education and private sector** - stakeholders noted that schools and colleges needed to do more outreach work linking in with local businesses, in addition to making training available to the local community. In particular, grammar schools were perceived to be very focused on academic education. Stakeholders noted that there is also a lack of awareness as to what rural business opportunities exist and what it is like to work in a rural business. Therefore, connections between education and private sector are crucial with some areas previously devising schemes to target schools, using role models to educate career teachers on rural business opportunities.
- **Skills Development** - stakeholders indicated that it can be difficult to get suitably qualified/skilled tutors/trainers in areas such as engineering and manufacturing. It was suggested that Level 2/3 NVQs should focus on skills development and that apprenticeships could be promoted better. Through ensuring that all current employability support has an outreach element, this could allow for delivery in local halls reaching young people. Specific training such as Young Farmers led courses could also be utilised, facilitating small practical learning experiences. Better use could also be made of the Millennium Volunteers Scheme.
- **Benefits** - stakeholders indicated that the benefits gap needs to be closed to fully incentivise people into work. For example, more research is needed on barriers to employment such connectivity (transport and broadband) and capacity of individuals. The impacts of Universal Credit on the unemployed also needs further research.
- **Planning** - stakeholders indicated that planning requirements do not generally facilitate the development of small rural businesses.
- **Childcare** - stakeholders noted that childcare facilities were needed for older children to support parents who want to continue working. Reference was also made to the potential for supporting social enterprises in this regard.
- **Business** - stakeholders noted that emphasis was needed on supporting small and micro enterprises with clarity as to what was considered as a non-farming enterprise. There were also concerns about availability of migrant workers.
- **Stakeholders** noted that the rural framework could only truly support rural communities if there were no division between agriculture, environment and rural development. Cognisance of the DoE strategy is also important.

### What might need changed?

- **Wording of Thematic Pillars** - stakeholders noted that there were similarities between thematic pillars 1 (rural innovation and entrepreneurship) and 4 (rural employment). It was suggested that thematic pillar 1 should focus on infrastructure/business and thematic pillar 4 should focus on people/skills. Stakeholders also noted that the identification and of and how need is determined should be clear. In regards to intervention 3, some stakeholders were of the view that the wording was too broad.

### What is missing?

- **Agri-food sector** - stakeholders noted that the agri-food sector is one of the largest private sector employers in NI (approx. 100k jobs), especially in rural areas. Stakeholders indicated that the sector should not be overlooked in terms of support for skills development, job creation, manufacturing, maintaining standards, small start-ups etc.
- **Childcare** - stakeholders noted that there was a need for support to enable access to affordable and consistent childcare beyond early years provision.
- **Connectivity/infrastructure** - stakeholders noted that there is a need for connectivity through both improved transport to rural areas and broadband provision. In particular, broadband was seen as critical for well-paid IT jobs.
- **Planning** - planning and infrastructure are critical in rural areas to facilitate employment. Planning restrictions in 'open countryside' can be a barrier for rural businesses. Suggestions were made that there should be zones for employment/business opportunities and that departments should work together to address any planning barriers. There are also issues with keeping families in rural areas given the lack of affordable housing.
- **Skills/Training** - stakeholders suggested that resource funding was required to build community capacity. Linkages between employers and the education sector are essential to ensure skills/knowledge gaps are identified with appropriate training/apprenticeships/support programmes delivered according to local needs (perhaps similar to previous ACE schemes). It is also important for the education sector to make students aware of different career opportunities (e.g. welding etc.) and to offer some sort of outreach training (perhaps through local halls) and informal courses to assist rural communities. Stakeholders noted that social clauses and apprenticeships should be promoted as good practice and is already a requirement within the public sector. There may be a need to train groups in smaller numbers and to provide different types of training such as hands on skills development.
- **Specialist training** - access to specialist training (e.g. environmental training) should be facilitated at the right stage. Specific training opportunities could be provided for certain groups such as young people, farmers and women etc. For example, an individualised approach to

### What is missing?

employability support may be needed for young people with complex issues prior to being able to access employment. However, some stakeholders indicated that training should not be segregated and should be open to all groups (i.e. farming community and non-farmers).

- **Access to Employment** - stakeholders noted that there needs to be a decentralisation of a variety of jobs to result in a more balanced region (e.g. centres such as Ballykelly). The focus should be on quality employment opportunities which will provide higher income levels. Improved access is also needed for public sector and IT jobs which would allow for flexible arrangements such as home working. Extra support may be needed for certain groups such as carers, young unemployed, and those with disabilities to facilitate access to employment.
- **Hubs** - reference was made to developing business capacity and opening routes to market. Rural areas could for example facilitate online business models (i.e. picking/packing/posting/stock hub).
- **Succession planning** - the cultural mindset needs shifted via an education process to inspire others and enable succession planning for both farming and non-farming businesses. Awareness is also needed in relation to social enterprises where grants are not availed of as rural businesses may not be aware that they are operating a social enterprise.
- A joined up approach is needed across Departments to address this issue and a proper means to measuring success.
- **Wording of Thematic Pillar** - stakeholders noted that thematic pillar 4 enables thematic pillar 1. Some stakeholders noted that the thematic pillar in addition to increasing employment opportunities should incorporate 'improve' and 'enable access' as well. There was some concern about the wording of the priority areas for intervention under the pillar, particularly the 'invest in and develop our rural society' and what it would entail. It was suggested that the theme should also focus heavily on sustainable development, particularly in relation to climate change, renewable energy etc.

## Annex 14 - Evidence Base Output from Connectivity Working Group

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Challenges and Opportunities re connectivity arising from post EU Rural Development Programme Funding, particularly in border communities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There could be difficulties for people who might have to travel further to access health care and other services.</li> <li>• Loss of EU funding could result in increased budgetary pressures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other Executive strategies and policies relevant to transport infrastructure, broadband and mobile communications</b></p>	<p><b>Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Rural Needs Act places a duty on all Departments, Councils and certain other public authorities to have due regard to rural needs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This strategy sets out the spatial framework to guide future development and aims to address economic, social and environmental issues to achieve sustainable development and social cohesion. It indicates that increased linkages between urban and rural areas are beneficial to both, and recognises that the most thriving rural areas are those that are connected with market towns which are in turn connected with city regions.</li> <li>• The RDS notes that all places benefit from economic growth reflecting the PfG approach of balanced sub-regional growth, recognising the importance of key settlements as centres for growth and investment. It also identifies the need to understand the role and function of settlements and their role in serving rural communities and the importance of promoting co-operation between places. It encourages clustering of towns and cities so that services can be shared and do not need to be duplicated. It identifies those settlements within close proximity to each other which have the potential to cluster helping to address economic, social and environmental issues aimed at achieving sustainable development and social cohesion.</li> </ul>



Issues	Findings
	<p><b>DAERA Vision</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability at the heart of a Living, Working, Active Landscape Valued by Everyone.</li> </ul> <p><b>Planning Act (NI) 2011</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This requires Councils to keep under review matters which might be expected to affect the development of the district including the communications, transport system and traffic of the district.</li> </ul> <p><b>Investment Strategy for NI</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Investment Strategy government seeks to tackle regional disadvantage by addressing the issues that affect our communities: tackling poverty, encouraging diversification, enhancing connectivity and improving the overall quality of service provision.</li> <li>• This strategy indicates that increased linkages between urban and rural areas are beneficial to both, and recognises that the most thriving rural areas are those that are connected with market towns which are in turn connected with city regions.</li> </ul> <p><b>Railway Investment Prioritisation Strategy 2014</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This strategy referred to feasibility studies including the longer term extensions of the rail network on the A6 and M1/A4 or A3/A29 corridors.</li> <li>• DfI gave clear evidence that whilst the current focus is on maintaining the safety, capacity and frequency of rail services, they are currently developing a suite of Transport Plans which will set out the priorities for future development. These include a new Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTNTP) which is concerned with strategic roads, the buses which run on them and the rail network across NI.</li> </ul>

Issues	Findings
<p><b>Practices in other jurisdictions/ Evidence &amp; Research Base relevant to broadband, mobile communications and transport in rural areas</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence from elsewhere in the UK and in Europe shows that central Government commitment is necessary for alternative types of transport in rural areas, such as Easilink Community Transport, and it operates best when it is managed at a regional level.</li> <li>• Research from Scotland found that the decision was made to close solicitor offices in cities and relocate to a large market town because customers valued free parking and the experience of going to a rural town. It was easier to recruit staff as they had access to forest runs and cycles. With the increasing focus on wellbeing and health, the benefits of rural locations could be promoted to businesses. The growth in social prescribers as part of the health care system means that the benefits of rural areas can be promoted to urban and rural dwellers and demonstrate the benefits of connectivity.</li> </ul>

## Annex 15 - Stakeholder Feedback for Connectivity Thematic Pillar

### Working Group 5: Connectivity Feedback from January 2020 Stakeholder Event

#### What do you agree with?

- **Connectivity (Broadband)** - stakeholders noted that the lack of adequate broadband/mobile coverage was a barrier to people moving to some rural communities. Reference was made to Project Stratum and the fact that despite substantial investment from Governmental Departments there are rural communities still with limited service. Stakeholders noted that FFNI Stratum 5G also needs to be included. The need for access to high speed broadband is a prerequisite to address many of the thematic pillars. Whilst some rural businesses install satellite broadband at a significant additional expense, it is not always reliable and there is a need for a regional balance.
- **Connectivity (Transport)** - stakeholders noted that a balance was needed in regards to rural transport. For example, funding may be better focused on community transport rather than underused bus services to connect rural dwellers into main transport routes (e.g. ARTS scheme). Park and ride can also service rural areas. Active travel via greenways etc. should also be promoted as it is good for physical activity and also social participation.
- **Rural Digital Hubs** - stakeholders noted that these were worth exploring as they could facilitate flexible working which would contribute to a better work life balance whilst also reducing environmental impacts with less commuting.
- **Skills Development** - stakeholders noted there is a need for a champion role and to facilitate skills development around online usage/knowledge. The community and voluntary sector play an important role, however, there is a need for more support for expenses and training to prevent volunteer fatigue.
- **Wording of thematic pillar** - stakeholders were in agreement with the proposals, however, they noted that a joined up approach was needed across government to ensure successful delivery given that the thematic pillar was seen as ambitious and difficult to achieve. The connectivity thematic pillar was seen as cross-cutting, delivering on many PfG outcomes (i.e. carbon, isolation, health and wellbeing) and a prerequisite to the delivery of the other pillars. Stakeholders noted that service accessibility was key.

### What might need changed?

- **Connectivity (Transport)** - stakeholders noted that resources (including public funding) may need to be redirected to ensure that local rural transport needs are realised. For example, it was suggested that there had been an excessive focus on the Glider and routes between Dublin and Belfast. A number of options could be explored such as park and ride sites with sufficient parking facilities; better use of Education Authority buses for out-of-school activities; flexibility around the use of private businesses such as small buses, taxis etc.; use of social car schemes; community social enterprise type travel. Stakeholders indicated that a focus was needed on getting people out of their cars, perhaps at transport hubs, and that there was not sufficient transport options for visitors and local people in rural areas. Additionally, it was suggested that DAERA should move away from pilots and develop a mechanism to invest in a long-term rural transport system.
- **Connectivity (Broadband)** - stakeholders noted that current connectivity needs to be maintained via a range of mechanisms to try and meet the demand for broadband in rural areas (e.g. stratum; Megabit and voucher project; obligations on private broadband providers who receive public funding to invest in the community). Not all customers in rural areas will receive high speed broadband, however, awareness is needed in relation to mobile technology developments and their impacts on rural businesses. There is also an issue of social isolation and the scope for technology to improve people's quality of life, particularly those with disabilities.
- **Education/awareness** - there is a need to educate people to the advantages and disadvantages of better connectivity (i.e. benefits of remote working vs dangers of social media and internet scams which could negatively impact on mental and emotional wellbeing).
- Stakeholders noted that accessibility to key services in health was key
- Stakeholders referred to the INTERREG pilot which failed as Departments did not pool budgets.
- **Wording of thematic pillar** - stakeholders noted that the assumption was that people wanted to travel from rural to urban areas for work and services but that the narrative needed to change to focus on connectivity generally. In regards to the second priority intervention, stakeholders noted that barriers also needed to be identified. Stakeholders also noted that accessibility needed to be reflected within the thematic pillar title and that this pillar is interconnecting with the other thematic pillars and is cross-cutting across Departments. Ultimately the focus has to be on the outcome and taking best practice on board, i.e. what do we want our rural communities to look like in the future?

### What is missing?

- **Connectivity (Broadband)** - stakeholders noted that good quality Broadband is crucial in all rural areas. It is important for employment/entrepreneurship and service delivery such as health services. Stakeholders noted that a range of solutions should be considered for rural areas, including a cost/benefit analysis of roll out (i.e. 5G, 4G mobile coverage, Wireless, High Speed Networks). It was suggested that DAERA needed to be represented on Project Stratum at a policy level and that decent Broadband in rural areas should be lobbied and advocated for. Once an appropriate Broadband network is in place, it needs to be appropriately marketed and communicated out to the community.
- **Connectivity (Transport)** - stakeholders noted that to date there has been an over reliance on Translink, although there are some successes such as the Glider and Park and Rides. The Rural Needs Act could be used to ensure provision of appropriate services to rural areas, this is especially needed for tourism purposes with timetables, reliable routes and services. Stakeholders noted that old railway stations could be opened up with better use made of existing stations. Interventions with the private/voluntary and community sector are needed to broaden access to transport. For example, buses could be hired out to the public; a more innovative approach to Rural Transport Fund provision could be considered (i.e. acting as social enterprises at a local level to ensure ongoing delivery for clients who are very reliant on the service). Stakeholders indicated that 'active travel' was important in terms of sustainability but does present health and safety issues on rural roads.
- **Connectivity (infrastructure)** - stakeholders raised concerns about the condition of some roads and suggested that more blueways/greenways, cycle paths/footpaths were needed as well. However, some stakeholders noted that there has been too much focus on connectivity in urban areas such as Belfast. Whilst for example, the M1 and M2 corridors as well as cross-border connectivity is important, there needs to be equal consideration given to connectivity between villages, towns and smaller settlements. Greenways could help reduce congestion on some of the busier routes.
- **Connectivity (Communities)** - stakeholders noted that the priority areas for intervention focused on infrastructure and that consideration should also be given to the community aspect and connecting people.
- **Connectivity (Energy)** - stakeholders noted that connectivity should be future proofed with for example, new houses having electric car charging points. Proper investment is needed in sewerage facilities in rural areas. Connectivity could be more climate friendly whilst still providing a vital service, for example, use of renewable energy to provide power such as wind farms, green energy and gas networks.

### What is missing?

- **Remote working** - stakeholders noted that in the first instance, employer attitudes to home working need to change. For example, it was suggested that DAERA could act as a champion and encourage other Departments to adopt remote working as employees do not need to be in the office full time. A suggestion was the use of local remote working hubs (which could be multi-functional) and result in investment in the local economy.
- **Funding/decision making** - stakeholders noted that it should be clear who the decision makers are with decision makers going out directly to rural communities to see what they can offer. It was noted that there is currently too much bureaucracy with more flexibility needed and recognition of the role of the border. The definition of 'rural' should be clear with the needs of urban and rural policies looked at cross-departmentally. Stakeholders noted that sufficient funding for rural communities is critical (for example, health places pressure on community transport services without investment and councils are also trying to avail of funding to close gaps and target hot spots).
- **Awareness** - it is important to make people aware of what is happening in their local rural areas (they could be commuting and not aware of what is available). Best practice from other jurisdictions should also be taken into account.
- **Volunteers** - volunteers need more support generally to encourage the next generation.
- **Planning** - statutory approval processes can hinder development in rural areas.

**For further information:**

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