

Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016	15 August 2017
Corporate Policy and Resources Committee	For Information

Linkage to Council Strategy (2015-19)	
Strategic Theme	Innovation and Transformation
Outcome	The Council will continuously examine and introduce ways to provide services in more accessible and efficient ways.
Lead Officer	Head of Policy and Community Planning
Cost: (If applicable)	

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 established rural proofing as a statutory obligation and established a duty on public authorities to have “*due regard to rural needs*” when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and designing and delivering public services.
- 1.2 The Act defines “rural needs” as “*the social and economic needs of rural areas*”. A need can be considered to be something that is essential to achieve a standard of living comparable with that of the population in general.
- 1.3 Rural proofing has been a requirement for all Government Departments in Northern Ireland since 2002 but in 2016 this commitment to rural proofing was broadened with the introduction of the Rural Needs Act.
- 1.4 The Rural Needs Act now applies to Councils from 1st June 2017 and will apply to a range of other public authorities from 2018.

2.0 What is Rural Proofing?

- 2.1 A range of challenges can face rural areas, from distance to key service centres to availability of broadband and mobile phone coverage. Rural proofing is a process by which policies, strategies, plans and service delivery are assessed to determine whether they will have a differential impact on rural areas.

2.2 Rural proofing requires those involved in public policy development to ensure rural areas are treated in a fair and reasonable way and the process will involve:

- Assessing the evidence of rural need and circumstances when designing or developing a policy, strategy, plan or service delivery proposal.
- Consider the options for fair impacts on the ground in rural areas
- Where appropriate adjust policies or delivery plans.

2.5 “Rural” is defined as those settlements with fewer than 5,000 residents together with the open countryside (as defined by the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group 2015).

3.0 What is Required of Council?

3.1 The Council is now required to conduct rural proofing of all policy, strategy, plans and public service delivery proposals via a process known as a Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

3.2 This involves:

- Developing a clear understanding of the objectives and/or intended outcomes of the proposed policy, strategy, plan or service
- Identifying if there are any specific rural needs or potential direct or indirect impacts for rural areas.
- Considering any available evidence to identify any differences between rural and urban needs.
- Developing and appraising options to address, overcome or mitigate against any barriers and impacts.
- Considering delivery of the policy, strategy, plan or service to ensure that fair rural outcomes are delivered
- Setting out a mechanism to monitor the rural outcomes of the policy/service delivery identified as part of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

3.2 The Council is also required to monitor their rural proofing activity and report on this on an annual basis via the submission of a report to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

3.3 DAERA will provide guidance, advice and information about issues connected with rural needs or ways of meeting these needs and they will also undertake or commission research relating to rural needs as appropriate.

3.4 DAERA have recently delivered a training session on the Rural Needs Act to the Senior Management Team and Heads of Service and have also provided a free of charge e-learning training package which will be rolled out to relevant staff.