

Appendix 1 - Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template – Accessible Version

SECTION 1 – Defining the activity subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

1A. Name of Public Authority.

Department for Communities

1B. Please provide a short title which describes the activity being undertaken by the Public Authority that is subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland

1C. Please indicate which category the activity specified in Section 1B above relates to.

- Developing a Policy Strategy Plan
- Adopting a Policy Strategy Plan
- Implementing a Policy Strategy Plan
- Revising a Policy Strategy Plan
- Designing a Public Service
- Delivering a Public Service

1D. Please provide the official title (if any) of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service document or initiative relating to the category indicated in Section 1C above.

Warm Healthy Homes: A new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland 2026–2036

1E. Please provide details of the aims and/or objectives of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service.

The Warm Healthy Homes Strategy 2026–2036 sets out a comprehensive framework to address fuel poverty, with the vision of ensuring “a warm, healthy home for everyone.” The strategy is structured around three core themes and a set of targeted objectives:

Core Themes

1. Make homes more energy efficient
2. Protect Consumers
3. Build Capacity through collaboration

Key Objectives

1. Objective 1: Increase investment in domestic energy efficiency schemes for low-income vulnerable households
2. Objective 2: Raise housing standards and improve enforcement
3. Objective 3: Implement a new support framework for energy affordability
4. Objective 4: Ensure robust protection and redress for heating and energy efficiency
5. Objective 5: Utilise and build on experience and knowledge of others to increase energy wellbeing
6. Objective 6: Ensure consistent, accessible financial support for low-income, vulnerable households in emergencies

These objectives are designed to tackle the root causes and impacts of fuel poverty by improving housing conditions, increasing access to support, and protecting vulnerable consumers. By raising housing standards and investing in energy efficiency, the strategy will reduce energy costs and improve living conditions. Collaboration with partners and better access to advice will ensure that support reaches those most in need, especially in rural and low-income communities. Consumer protections and emergency financial support will help prevent households from falling into or remaining in fuel poverty.

1F. What definition of 'rural' is the Public Authority using in respect of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?

- Population Settlements of less than 5,000 (Default definition).
- Other definition (Provide details and the rationale below).
- A definition of 'rural is not applicable'

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Reasons why a definition of 'rural' is not applicable.

Click or tap here to enter text.

SECTION 2 - Understanding the impact of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

2A. Is the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service likely to impact on people in rural areas?

Yes No

If the response is **NO GO TO Section 2E.**

2B. Please explain how the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas.

The Warm Healthy Homes Strategy 2026–2036 is likely to have a significant and positive impact on people living in rural areas. The strategy recognises that many rural households rely on unregulated fuels such as oil and solid fuel, which can be more expensive and less efficient. To address this, the strategy includes commitments to work closely with partners to ensure that rural households benefit from new and existing energy schemes, particularly those aimed at improving energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty. It also aims to improve understanding of supply issues affecting rural areas and explore more affordable oil payment options, such as oil-buying networks, which are especially relevant for rural communities.

The introduction of the Warm Healthy Homes Fund in 2027 is a key initiative that will prioritise low-income and vulnerable households, many of whom live in rural areas with older, less energy-efficient housing. This scheme will provide whole-house retrofits, including insulation, heating upgrades, and renewable energy installations like solar panels and battery storage, which are particularly beneficial for off-grid rural homes.

Furthermore, the strategy promotes community-based delivery models, supporting local energy projects and partnerships that can tailor solutions to the specific needs of rural communities. It also commits to increasing access to trusted energy advice through community organisations and health professionals, recognising that rural residents may face barriers to accessing information and support. The development of a One Stop Shop and improved referral pathways will help ensure that rural households can more easily navigate and benefit from available support.

Finally, the strategy aligns with the Just Transition principle, ensuring that rural communities are not left behind in the shift to low-carbon energy systems. It acknowledges the unique challenges faced by rural households, such as higher upfront costs and limited supplier options, and seeks to mitigate these through targeted investment, improved data-sharing, and inclusive policy design.

2C. If the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas, please explain how it is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently.

Rural households are more likely to rely on unregulated fuels such as oil and solid fuels, which are often more expensive and subject to supply issues. These households also tend to live in older, less energy-efficient homes, increasing their vulnerability to fuel poverty. Recognising this, the strategy includes a specific commitment to “work closely with partners

as schemes launch to maximise take-up from rural areas where households are reliant on unregulated oil and solid fuels.” This targeted approach aims to ensure that rural communities are not left behind in the transition to more energy-efficient and affordable heating solutions.

Additionally, the strategy acknowledges that rural residents may face greater barriers in accessing energy advice and support services due to geographic isolation or limited digital connectivity. To address this, the strategy proposes expanding access to trusted, community-based energy advice and improving referral pathways through local organisations and health professionals. It also supports the development of community-led energy initiatives, which can be particularly effective in rural settings where local networks play a vital role in reaching vulnerable households.

2D. Please indicate which of the following rural policy areas the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to primarily impact on.

- Rural Businesses
- Rural Tourism
- Rural Housing
- Jobs or Employment in Rural Areas
- Education or Training in Rural Areas
- Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas
- Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas
- Health or Social Care Services in Rural Areas
- Poverty in Rural Areas
- Deprivation in Rural Areas
- Rural Crime or Community Safety
- Rural Development
- Agri-Environment
- Other (Please state)

Click or tap here to enter text.

If the response to Section 2A was YES GO TO Section 3A.

2E. Please explain why the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is NOT likely to impact on people in rural areas.

Click or tap here to enter text.

SECTION 3 - Identifying the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas

3A. Has the Public Authority taken steps to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas that are relevant to the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?

Yes No

If the response is **NO GO TO Section 3E.**

3B. Please indicate which of the following methods or information sources were used by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

- Consultation with Rural Stakeholders
- Consultation with Other Organisations
- Surveys or Questionnaires
- Published Statistics
- Research Papers
- Other Publications
- Other Methods or Information Sources (include details in Question 3C below).

3C. Please provide details of the methods and information sources used to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas including relevant dates, names of organisations, titles of publications, website references, details of surveys or consultations undertaken etc.

To identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas, a range of methods and evidence sources were used during the development of the Warm Healthy Homes Strategy 2026–2036.

A Fuel Poverty Project Board was established, comprising senior officials from Executive Departments including the Department for Communities (DfC), Department for the Economy (DfE), The Executive Office (TEO), Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), and Department of Health (DoH), alongside representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Consumer Council NI (CCNI), and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR). This Board provided strategic oversight and ensured that rural issues were considered throughout the development of the strategy.

A Fuel Poverty Reference Panel was also convened, bringing together academics, voluntary and community sector representatives, and Section 75 group advocates. The panel worked closely with officials to provide evidence-based advice, identify gaps in provision, and ensure that rural perspectives were reflected in the strategy's design and delivery.

To gather direct insights, a series of workshops and focus groups were held, including two specifically focused on rural needs. These sessions engaged organisations working with rural populations and individuals with lived experience of fuel poverty in rural areas. The Public Consultation on the draft Fuel Poverty Strategy ran from 12 December 2024 to 6 March 2025. The Rural Community Network was among the stakeholders who contributed to the consultation process, offering valuable insight into the specific challenges faced by rural households.

A number of consultation responses highlighted rural considerations. In recognition of this, the Strategy explicitly acknowledges these issues and demonstrates how stakeholder input has informed its development, ensuring that rural needs are comprehensively addressed.

The strategy's vision and outcomes were co-designed with stakeholders and shared with a Cross-Departmental Working Group, which included representatives from DAERA, DfE, DfC, and DoH. This group helped shape the actions and commitments to ensure rural needs were fully integrated.

In terms of data and research, the strategy drew on key publications including:

- Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2016 (NIHE):
<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Report.aspx>
- DAERA Key Rural Issues 2021 Report: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/key-rural-issues-publication-2021>
- Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016,
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/19/contents>

These combined approaches ensured that the strategy was informed by robust data, expert input, and meaningful engagement with rural communities.

3D. Please provide details of the social and economic needs of people in rural areas which have been identified by the Public Authority?

- Rural households are more likely to depend on unregulated energy sources such as oil and solid fuels. These fuels are often more expensive and subject to price volatility, which increases the risk of fuel poverty in rural areas.
- Rural homes tend to be older and have lower energy efficiency standards compared to urban housing. This contributes to higher heating costs and greater difficulty in maintaining warm, healthy living conditions.
- People in rural areas may face barriers in accessing energy advice, financial support, and retrofit schemes due to geographic isolation, limited digital connectivity, and fewer local service providers.
- The strategy recognises that rural communities require bespoke solutions. This includes the need for targeted outreach, improved referral pathways, and community-based delivery models to ensure support reaches those most in need.
- The strategy highlights the importance of working with rural communities through local organisations and community energy projects as these organisations are trusted in their community. These initiatives help build local capacity, improve energy wellbeing, and ensure that rural voices are heard in policy development.
- The strategy identifies the need for improved data collection and sharing to better understand the specific circumstances of rural households and to target support more effectively.

If the response to Section 3A was YES GO TO Section 4A.

3E. Please explain why no steps were taken by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas?

Click or tap here to enter text.

SECTION 4 - Considering the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas

4A. Please provide details of the issues considered in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

- Rural households are disproportionately reliant on unregulated fuels such as oil and solid fuel, which are more expensive and subject to price volatility. The strategy recognises this as a key driver of fuel poverty in rural areas and includes commitments to explore more affordable oil payment options and improve understanding of supply issues.
- Many rural homes are older and less energy efficient, contributing to higher heating costs and increased vulnerability to cold, damp, and mould. The strategy addresses this by committing to retrofit programmes and the introduction of minimum energy efficiency standards across all tenures.
- People in rural areas may face barriers to accessing energy advice, financial support, and retrofit schemes due to geographic isolation, limited digital connectivity, and fewer local service providers. The strategy proposes expanding access to trusted, community-based energy advice and improving referral pathways through local organisations and health professionals.
- The strategy acknowledges the importance of community-led initiatives in rural areas. It supports the development of community energy projects and partnerships that can deliver tailored solutions, such as local energy generation and energy-saving schemes.
- Recognising the unique needs of rural communities, the strategy includes a specific commitment to “work closely with partners as schemes launch to maximise take-up from rural areas where households are reliant on unregulated oil and solid fuels.”
- The strategy identifies the need for improved data collection and sharing to better understand the specific circumstances of rural households and to ensure that interventions are effectively targeted

SECTION 5 - Influencing the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

5A. Has the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, been influenced by the rural needs identified?

Yes No

If the response is **NO GO TO Section 5C.**

5B. Please explain how the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, has been influenced by the rural needs identified.

The Warm Health Homes Strategy has been developed through a process of co-design with ongoing engagement and collaboration with partner organisations including those with a rural focus. In addition to this the strategy development process has included input from focus groups and workshops in which the voices and concerns of those in or at risk of fuel poverty including those living in rural settings were heard and their experiences reflected in the final strategy.

The main issues identified included the absence of a gas network, reliance on oil and solid fuels, poor energy efficiency in homes, limited access to essential services, broadband connectivity, and public transport.

These insights directly informed the strategy's design, leading to:

- The inclusion of rural-specific actions in the Warm Healthy Homes Fund.
- Commitments to improve data collection and sharing to better identify and support rural households.
- Support for community-led energy initiatives and local delivery models to ensure accessibility in rural areas.
- Enhanced referral pathways and trusted advice networks tailored to the needs of rural communities.

If the response to Section 5A was **YES GO TO Section 6A.**

5C. Please explain why the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or the delivery of the Public Service, has NOT been influenced by the rural needs identified.

Click or tap here to enter text.

SECTION 6 - Documenting and Recording

6A. Please tick below to confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained by the Public Authority and relevant information on the Section 1 activity compiled in accordance with paragraph 6.7 of the guidance.

I confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained and relevant information compiled.

Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by:

Michael Clarke

Position/Grade:

Staff Officer

Division/Branch:

Climate Change Division

Signature:

Michael Clarke

Date:

03/11/2025

Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:

Angus Kerr

Position/Grade:

G5

Division/Branch:

Michael Clarke

Signature:

Angus Kerr

Date:

15/01/2026