

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 (DfC)

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.

Development of a new Public Libraries Policy

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.

Public Libraries Policy

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

The new policy for public libraries will replace the current policy, entitled Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries, published by DCAL around 2006. The new policy will set out broad aims for the public library service delivered by Libraries NI. The policy aims will necessarily reflect and will not run contrary to the legislative duty as set out in

the Libraries Act (2008) NI.

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.

Not Applicable

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

Not Applicable

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

Not Applicable

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 new policy will be underpinned by Libraries NI's legal duty to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service for persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.' The public libraries network is made up of 96 library facilities geographically spread across Northern Ireland. Libraries NI also operates a mobile library service and the Library in a Box service to support people who may not use their nearest library facility and/or Libraries NI's extensive range of online borrowing material.

The 2024/25 Continuous Household Survey found that there was no difference between the percentage of adults living in rural (22%) or urban (23%) areas who used public libraries.

Libraries NI has advised that 29 public library facilities are in rural settlements. In addition, nine other libraries had over 50% of active users from rural areas and a further ten libraries had over 40%, meaning 48 of our 96 libraries draw at least 40% of their active membership from rural communities.

The importance of access to public library services by people and communities living in rural areas is acknowledged and understood by Libraries NI and the Department, both of which engage regularly with DAERA in the form of a long-standing working group. It is therefore anticipated that the new policy will recognise and amplify the importance of maintaining a comprehensive library service for people and communities in rural areas..

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.

It is anticipated that the new libraries policy will not bring significant change to Libraries NI's current service delivery model as described at 2B, nor will it impact the universal services offered by public libraries. The new policy will therefore not impact people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas.

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)

Digital and Social exclusion.

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.

Not applicable

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.

Consideration has been given to:

- NISRA - The Continuous Household Survey 2024/25
- Relevant guidance provided by DAERA, including the Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) for Public Authorities. (A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 for Public Authorities (Revised) (daera-ni.gov.uk)).
- DAERA's Key Rural Issues 1993: Key Rural Issues 2023
- Operational information provided by Libraries NI detailing the 48 library facilities where people living in rural areas account for 40% or more of active membership (in 2022/23).
- Operational information provided by Libraries NI detailing the use of services

in the 29 libraries facilities located in a rural settlement during 2022/23 (see table below).

	Adult	Children	Combined
Active Membership	14,523	16,492	31,015
Issues and Renewals	218,048	335,033	553,081
Public Access Terminal Sessions	16,307	2,746	19,053
Wi-Fi Sessions	8,712	636	9,348

- Operational information provided by Libraries NI in respect of participation in core services offered by all 29 libraries serving rural communities as well as details in connection with events and exhibitions held in those library facilities.
- Operational information in connection with tackling digital exclusion, including free WI-FI in all library buildings, free access to computers, programmed sessions to support digital confidence and safety online, and guidance from trained library staff.
- NI Multi-Deprivation Measure 2017 which indicates that in relation to accessing key public services, physical and online, 95 of the 100 most deprived Super Output Areas are classified as rural.
- Engagement between the Department and Rural Community Network..

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

Our public libraries contribute to meeting several social and economic needs of people in rural areas, including:

- Tackling social, economic, and digital exclusion.
- Promoting good health and mental wellbeing.
- Access to resources, information and services.
- Supporting educational needs, creativity, and life-long learning.
- Supporting social cohesion (through local heritage collections, celebrating diversity, inclusive and welcoming spaces etc.).

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?

Not applicable

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.

Our public libraries contribute to meeting several social and economic needs of people in rural areas, including:

- Tackling social, economic, and digital exclusion.
- Promoting good health and mental wellbeing.
- Access to resources, information and services.
- Supporting educational needs, creativity, and life-long learning.
- Supporting social cohesion (through local heritage collections, celebrating diversity, inclusive and welcoming spaces etc.).

In connection with the above needs:

- The public library service has a unique physical reach with its network of 96 geographically spread library facilities and the mobile library service. Alongside working with local communities to meet local needs, our libraries offer free-at-the-point-of-access universal services (excluding a modest charge for photocopying). Our library service supports equality of opportunity for people to access reading material (physical and online), computers, WI-FI, trusted information, and services. The evidence supports that people living in rural areas find it more challenging to access physical and online public services. Our public libraries provide the means and support for rural dwellers to access resources, information and services, including those connected to employability and educational needs.
- Our libraries provide welcoming and inclusive spaces for everyone to use and enjoy. With universal services and programmed events supporting creativity, learning, physical and mental wellbeing, or simple bringing people together, our libraries help tackle exclusion and social isolation. In addition to the universal services offered, our public libraries work closely with local communities to meet local needs and promote social cohesion through local heritage collections, promoting and celebrating diversity of local communities, and locally organised events and exhibitions. Our libraries also offer services and programmed events specifically aimed at those living in rural areas.
- Our libraries promote the joy of reading and the multi-faceted benefits it can bring. Libraries offer a range of choices in connection with accessing reading material, physical and online. The mobile and Homecall services provide extended access to rural communities beyond the physical library network ensuring that people who wish to access free reading material are able to do so.
- Libraries NI has worked with DAERA to increase the opening hours of eight libraries located in rural settlements and/or serve rural communities. Capital funding investment in 'Out of Hours' projects has enabled people living in rural areas to access their local library to use the space and/or avail of services outside of normal operating hours.
- Equity of access to services remains a key issue for rural communities. Rural

travel infrastructure is limited compared to urban settlements and access is limited still further where rural dwellers do not have access to private transport. While data shows 89% of people in Northern Ireland live within two miles of a library service point, only 67% of those living in rural communities do.

- People in education and older people in rural areas are the two age ranges most likely to access a library in terms of need e.g. education, research, digital hubs, and socialising. There is a need to consider not just the reach of the library service, but also how working with others can better support access to library services. .

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.

Libraries NI is duty bound to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service for persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.' This duty extends to and includes people who live in rural areas. Libraries NI currently does this partly through universal library services provided at 29 libraries located in rural settlements and those libraries which service rural communities. Libraries NI's services to rural communities are also delivered through its online provision, mobile libraries and other resources.

The new policy for public libraries will take account of Libraries NI's legislative duty. It will also take account the rural needs identified and how Libraries NI will continue to meet those needs for the lifespan of the policy.

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.

Not applicable

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:

Simon Morton

Position/Grade:

Deputy Principal

Division/Branch:

Culture Policy Branch

Signature:

Simon Morton

Date:

13/01/26

Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:

Richard Patrick

Position/Grade:

Grade 7 Head of Branch

Division/Branch:

Culture Policy Branch

Signature:

Richard Patrick

Date:

07/07/2026