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.

DfC is launching and administering a funding scheme which provides support to owners of listed buildings and scheduled monuments with a view to improving the condition and increasing public awareness of the historic environment.

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.

The answer to 1C is Revising a Policy. The Historic Environment Fund 2026-27

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

To encourage action by third parties to bring heritage assets up to a reasonable / good state of repair and thereafter, maintain them in a good state of repair through preventative maintenance.

To encourage and support action to repair and find a sustainable use for heritage assets which are at risk of loss.

To support the action to repair monuments most at risk; and to initiate progress at targeted sites with relevant stakeholders.

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.

The answer to 1F is 'Other definition'

Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group, Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (2005), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

This was used for recent survey work commissioned by Historic Environment Division on the condition of listed buildings in NI, which informs the policy

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

N/A

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 answer to 2A is YES

The Historic Environment Fund aims to stimulate action by third parties to 'help communities to enjoy and realise the value of the historic environment', which is the Division's mission. There two 4 streams in 2026/27:

The Repair Stream is open to owners across the whole of Northern Ireland as it encourages the repair of historic buildings, in addition to masonry repairs at monuments, regardless of location (urban or rural) but with a particular objective in 2026/27 to prioritise churches, which are more likely to have significant maintenance burdens in rural areas as they typically have smaller congregations. This funding will be dispersed via the National Churches Trust.

The National Churches Trust Survey for Northern Ireland in 2026 identifies that 'in rural areas especially, they are often the only space consistently open to and offered to all'; therefore they provide a key source of refuge for rural communities and there is pressure on volunteers and finances in maintaining large historic buildings https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/NationalChurchesSurveyNorthernIreland2026_1.pdf

The Regeneration Stream invests in key partners to deliver projects:

Heritage at Risk (Ulster Architectural Heritage) to work with owners to find and invest in solutions for vacant buildings which are at risk of loss and available for reuse;

Harnessing Heritage, which supports communities to unlock potential of vacant historic buildings (Architectural Heritage Fund);

National Churches Trust, which supports capacity building amongst those who care for churches; and

Rural Community Network; which supports investment in Community Monuments, in partnership with the Heritage Fund

A modest sum from the Regeneration Stream is allocated to the repair of Scheduled Monuments, and these are more likely to be located in rural areas, often providing a key destination for tourists, and for locals seeking refuge for wellbeing purposes.

The funding is targeted at heritage assets; however, these are occupied by the people who live and work in them. Together with the rural landscape, these listed buildings and scheduled monuments also provide the background to their lives, as key landmarks, or focal points, and sources of pride and local identity.

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.

For the Repair Stream, in relation to funding for churches, the NCT has highlighted that from their experience and data gathering, they have a very equal spread in terms of the churches they fund, with roughly equal numbers in urban and rural areas. In terms of how the funding impacts people living in those areas, again the effect is broadly similar. In both urban and rural areas, churches deliver a large amount of social good, through youth clubs, food banks, addiction services and in less direct way ways, through creating opportunities for people to meet, be socially active, volunteer and feel part of the wider community. While the social issues might be different in urban and rural areas, the role of the church in both settings is the same, they help address the needs of the local community. The role of NCT as a funder is to help keep these vital spaces open and operating.

There is no likely different impact perceived for the Regeneration Stream in relation to funding allocated to AHF and UAH, as the work of these strategic partners is spread across Northern Ireland. There is, however, potential for a different impact through support for the Rural Community Network, as the Community Monument Support Officer post, which this funds, is more likely to target rural areas. Also, as noted in response to 2B, the modest sum of money set aside in the Regeneration Stream for repairs to scheduled monuments is also more likely to benefit people in rural areas given that is where these are predominantly located.

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)

Cross cutting issues - Owners of listed buildings and scheduled monuments, or those employed to work on them

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.

N/A

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.

The answer to 3A is YES

As part of the survey on the Condition of Listed Buildings in NI carried out in 2023-24 Survey [Survey on the Condition of Listed Buildings (2023/24)], a sample of 1504 listed buildings were selected across NI to assess their condition and risk level. This included ownership type; grade; settlement band; and NUTS 3 level.

For settlement types, this was based on the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group, Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (2005), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, for which Bands F (Intermediate Settlement), G (Village) and H (Small village, hamlet and open countryside) were

considered as Rural. The majority of buildings (56%) were rural.

There was a statistically significant difference between the proportion of buildings in Rural settlements being considered at 'Critical' Risk compared to buildings in Urban or Provincial settlements, which highlights the fragile nature of this environmental resource. There were also small but statistically significant differences between the proportion of listed buildings that were rated 'Very good/Good' in Urban (Belfast and L'derry 25.9%), and Provincial (large, medium and small towns 27.1%) settlements compared to Rural (intermediate settlements villages, hamlets and countryside 22.7%).

This survey impacts the social and economic needs of rural people as, well maintained, listed buildings attract business and investment; maintain a sense of belonging, identity and pride; and attract tourism, therefore contributing to the local economy (In 2022, five of the top ten most visited paid attractions in NI were in rural areas). Conversely, poorly maintained listed buildings diminish the opportunity for these social and economic benefits for rural people.

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

As 3C, Key Rural Issues, NI 2024 [Key Rural Issues 2024_v2.pdf] and the Northern Ireland National Churches Survey 2026 [https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/NationalChurchesSurveyNorthernIreland2026_1.pdf]

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?

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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.

As the HEF focuses on the condition of listed buildings, the social and economic needs of people who occupy, work on or in, or experience these buildings was the main consideration.

The funding scheme may have a positive impact on people in rural areas by improving the quality of their local churches and scheduled monuments; creating construction jobs, some of which may involve training; and improving tourism by repairing local landmarks.

The Regeneration funding to Architectural Heritage Fund and to Ulster Architectural Heritage is intended to address social and economic needs of rural people by reducing dereliction, therefore making them more attractive places to live and work; and by bringing communities together. Likewise, the support to the Rural Community Network empowers communities to manage the repair of scheduled monuments, which has the social benefit of bringing people together while improving their surrounding environment.

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 answer to 5A is yes

The HEF Repair Stream for 2026/27 will prioritise churches; this is partly due to the withdrawal in Mar 2026 of the Listed Places of Worship grant scheme by UK DCMS, which refunded VAT on repair work to churches. It will be dispersed via the National Churches Trust's UK wide existing medium and large grants programmes, through a specific NI only church repair fund. As noted in response to 2B, churches in rural areas are more likely to be struggling with the cost of maintenance; and they provide a vital resource for rural communities of all ages and faiths to connect.

The Regeneration Stream does not specifically target rural settlements but as two of the 3 key partners, Ulster Architectural Heritage and the Architectural Heritage Fund, focus on Heritage at Risk. There may be more benefit for rural communities, depending on where applicants are located, as there are more listed buildings categorized as 'Critical' on NI's Heritage at Risk register in rural than in urban or provincial settlements.

Finally, support for a Community Monument Support Officer via the Rural Community Network, in partnership with the Heritage Fund, is more likely to benefit rural inhabitants due to the location of most scheduled monuments in agricultural settings.

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.

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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:

Nicola Golden

Position/Grade:

Senior Conservation Architect / SPTO

Division/Branch:

Historic Environment Division / Heritage Advice and Regulation Branch

Signature:

Nicola Golden

Date:

13th Oct 2026

Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:

Natalie O'Rourke

Position/Grade:

Principal Conservation Architect, G7

Division/Branch:

Historic Environment Division / Heritage Advice and Regulation Branch

Signature:

Natalie O’Rourke

Date:

26th Oct 2026