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, Historic Environment Division (HED)

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.

Village Catalyst programme. This is a partnership between HED, DAERA, NIHE and Architectural Heritage Fund that seeks to invest in vacant historic buildings, which are at risk of loss in small rural settlements, as a way of tackling rural poverty and social isolation.

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. Village Catalyst programme.

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

1. To encourage communities to conserve and reuse historic buildings at risk in the rural area with a view to tackling rural poverty and social isolation.

2. The conservation and reuse of historic buildings at risk to a good standard.

3. To improve wellbeing, provide opportunities for social engagement and support groups in the rural area through the development and realisation of historic building regeneration projects.

4. To help tackle financial poverty in the rural area through construction jobs and the creation or maintenance of sustainable rural jobs.

5. To help tackle access poverty and social isolation in the rural area through improving access to key services in restored historic buildings.

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

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

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

The answer to 1F is 'Population Settlements of less than 5,000'

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

N/A

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

It will provide funding to support community groups and charities to invest in the conservation and reuse of historic buildings at risk, in small rural settlements, as a way of tackling rural poverty and social isolation.

The Village Catalyst programme was preceded by a pilot and the economic appraisal of that explains the impact:

'Historic buildings can often be a source of pride for communities. They reflect the history of their location and provide distinctiveness to an area. When run down they can, however, project an air of decline influencing more general confidence in the future.

The regeneration of historic buildings, particularly by community groups for a social function, therefore, has potential, beyond that of a new build project, to positively demonstrate the presence of a resilient community and to improve local confidence and pride. Such group action influences community wellbeing, tackling social isolation and, through appropriate new uses, has the potential to impact beneficially on isolation and rural poverty. Historic buildings can also add to the attractiveness and authenticity of an area which can contribute to tourism and therefore bring further economic benefit.'

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.

The Village Cataylst programme exclusively targets rural communities to revitalise disused historic buildings by empowering them to tackle rural poverty and social isolation, a DAERA initiative [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-rural-poverty-social-isolation-new-framework].

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.

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

Rural social and economic needs were identified from sources including DAERA's TRPSI Framework / NISRA settlement information / Commissioned primary research, principally the September 2020 Village Catalyst Baseline Study Consultations with councils/Rural Support Networks / Existing community consultation evidence contained within Village Plans as well as stakeholder evidence from rural, community, heritage, government and funding organisations.

The Village Catalyst Pilot tested how identified needs translated into tangible projects in rural areas, providing community facilities, and creating access to

services which helped address locally identified need. 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.

Refer to Section 1 (page 12) of Heritage Delivers for more information on the economic benefits of heritage [https://niheritagedelivers.org/ni-heritage-delivers-2026-published/]. In summary, heritage helps to
• attract inward investment;
• retain population;
• support town-centre regeneration;
• contribute to housing delivery through adaptive reuse;
• underpin creative industries; and
• sustain specialist construction skills.
In addition, heritage visitors stay longer and spend more than other tourists.

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; and Key Rural Issues, NI 2024 [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-rural-issues-2024]

In addition, the application form requests information on the social and economic needs identified in their area. This is assessed as part of a range of indicators against which applications are scored and ranked.

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.

Tackling rural poverty was a key commitment of the NI Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15. The Executive produced a Rural White Paper and Action Plan as part of this. One of the key policy priorities set out in this was to 'seek to minimise, where it exists, disadvantage, poverty, social exclusion, and inequality in rural areas particularly among vulnerable groups.'

The March 2016 Framework for Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI), was published by DAERA following extensive consultation. The document is regarded by DAERA as an important tool for the delivery of this Government priority.

The framework sets out to:

• promote the development of new and innovative approaches to tackling poverty and social isolation in rural areas;

• encourage effective partnership working between the Department, other statutory organisations and the rural community sector in seeking to tackle poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas;

• support interventions which lever additional resources to tackle poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas to maximise the benefits from TRPSI funding;

• facilitate the piloting of new projects aimed at tackling poverty and social isolation in rural areas more effectively and to encourage the mainstreaming of new approaches by public authorities if they prove to be successful;

• promote the sharing of information, best practice and expertise and

• promote an increase in understanding of the causes of poverty and social

isolation in rural areas.

A scheme to refurbishment heritage assets by communities for community uses is an innovative approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion. It has been tested as a pilot since 2018 and shown promising results.

The framework lists three priority areas: Access Poverty; Financial Poverty and Social Isolation.

The aim under Access Poverty is to improve access to key services. Repurposed historic buildings may have the potential to provide a space for such services.

Relevant aims to tackle financial poverty are to:
• reduce household expenditure – by closer services in a nearby village; and
• increase household incomes – by jobs associated with a completed heritage project and its new use.

Relevant aims to tackle social isolation include:
• promoting positive health and wellbeing- visits to historic sites or buildings, in addition to volunteering, have been shown to have a significant statistically relevant impact upon wellbeing [https://historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/heritage-and-economy/wellbeing/]
• increasing opportunities for social engagement – by community projects delivering community uses; and
• providing support for groups.

The framework then sets out 12 principles and isolates target groups. Projects by community groups conserving and reusing local historic buildings have the potential to support many of these.

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 needs identified have influenced the development of clear objectives for the project, as listed at 1E above. These in turn have influenced the scoring mechanism and requirements for baseline and completion survey questionnaires from applicants, which will inform post project evaluation.

There are more listed buildings categorized as 'Critical' on NI's Heritage at Risk register in rural than in urban or provincial settlements and the Village Catalyst programme specifically targets buildings on the NI's Heritage at Risk register.

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:

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