Appendix 1 - Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template

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 – Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services Division

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.

Proposed changes to Discretionary Support scheme consultation 2026.
This RNIA provides the interim findings for the proposed changes. The department will take into account the views and findings of the public consultation before publishing a final RNIA

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

Developing a	Policy	X	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.

Proposed changes to Discretionary Support scheme consultation 2026

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

The aim of the policy is to reform the Discretionary Support Scheme to ensure that support is targeted effectively towards those households most in need of assistance during periods of financial crisis, emergency or exceptional hardship. The proposed changes seek to improve the operation of the scheme by providing greater clarity around eligibility, improving service delivery and ensuring that available resources are directed towards vulnerable low-income households.

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).	X
Other Definition (Provide details and the rationale below).	
A definition of 'rural' is not applicable.	

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

N/A

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 [X] 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 proposed changes to the Discretionary Support Scheme are intended to better target support towards vulnerable low-income households experiencing financial crisis, improve service delivery and provide greater clarity regarding eligibility. The proposals would apply consistently across Northern Ireland, including rural communities.

The proposed changes are expected to have a neutral to minor positive impact on people living in rural areas. In particular, the introduction of support for boiler repairs and the proposed direct supply model may help address some of the practical challenges associated with accessing essential goods and services in rural locations. No significant adverse impacts on rural communities have been identified.

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.

N/A

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	X
Deprivation in Rural Areas	X
Rural Crime or Community Safety	
Rural Development	
Agri-Environment	
Other (Please state)	

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 [X] 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	[ ]	Published Statistics	[ ]
Consultation with Other Organisations	[ ]	Research Papers	[ ]
Surveys or Questionnaires	[ ]	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.

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

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?

Eligibility for an award of Discretionary Support is not dependent on whether someone lives in a rural area or an urban area. Any proposed changes implemented from the Discretionary Support consultation will apply to all claimants meeting the required criteria. There are no adverse impacts linked to geographical location – impacts are expected to be either positive or neutral. The most notable potential benefits relate to boiler repair assistance and the direct supply model, which may help address practical challenges associated with accessing goods and services in rural locations.

Rural-based claimants will be impacted by any changes in the same way as urban claimants with no disparity.

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.

The proposed reforms are intended to improve the targeting of support to vulnerable low-income households, improve service delivery and provide greater clarity regarding eligibility. The consultation includes measures intended to strengthen support for people experiencing financial hardship.

The Department has considered the potential for differential impacts on rural residents arising from changes to eligibility, income assessment arrangements and the forms of support available. Consultation responses, including those from individuals and organisations representing rural communities, will be considered alongside available evidence to help inform final policy decisions. As the consultation remains ongoing, no final decisions have been taken regarding the future design of the scheme.

Number of Discretionary Support claims 2025/2026

Statistics

Discretionary Support	Number
Claims processed	131,770
Awards made	85,060
Discretionary Support Grants*	41,683
Discretionary Support Loans	32,008
Universal Credit New Claims Grants	18,697

* Does not include Universal Credit New Claims Grants.

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** [X] **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.

N/A

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.

Eligibility for an award of Discretionary Support is not dependent on whether someone lives in a rural area or an urban area. Any changes to the Discretionary Support scheme following the consultation will apply to all claimants who meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme.

Analysis to date has not identified evidence that the proposed eligibility changes would disproportionately disadvantage rural claimants. Two proposals, boiler repair support and direct supply arrangements, may provide additional benefits for some rural households. Consultation responses from rural stakeholders will be considered before a final RNIA is completed.

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. X

Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by:	Claire Doyle
Position/Grade:	DP
Division/Branch	SSPLDMS
Signature:	Claire Doyle
Date:	20 November 2026
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	Hayley Ward
Position/Grade:	G7
Division/Branch:	SSPLDMS
Signature:	Hayley Ward
Date:	25 November 2026