



Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland

RTPI Response to DAERA,
September 2021

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In 2021, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) published a consultation on a proposed Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. The consultation can be viewed at: www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/rural-policy-framework-northern-ireland-consultation

Rural Northern Ireland is an important part of Northern Ireland and contributes overall to the economy, environmental services - supporting all of Northern Ireland, including the towns and cities - and society. Having a comprehensive rural framework provides a cohesive and effective structure to the approach to be taken by government policy and a direction of travel for other public stakeholders and private investors.

RTPI NI welcomes and supports the proposed Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

Do you agree that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) approach should continue under the wider umbrella of the Rural Policy Framework?

RTPI NI supports this.

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) approach provides a framework under which to coordinate and deliver actions to specifically support rural needs covering access to employment, access to public services in rural areas such as reliable transport services. The provision of these services in rural parts of Northern Ireland is not deemed to be economically sustainable however, given a large percentage of the Northern Ireland population (36%) lives in rural areas, their needs need to be addressed, particularly as the standard of living in rural areas is more expensive than for those living in urban areas, and poverty and deprivation in rural areas tend to be more 'hidden' which can result in a reduced focus on rural areas, as indicated in the consultation. Local services in rural areas need to be managed effectively to ensure they meet need and are delivered as efficiently as possible. A joined-up approach from all Departments, with responsibilities to provide services in rural areas, as important to support the effective delivery. There is also a lack of recognition of the partnership working that the Departments could do with other bodies to address rural activities.

What are the main challenges facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years?

From the list RTPI NI selected the following challenges by priority:

- 1 (Most significant): Climate change and environmental sustainability
- 2: Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services)
- 3: Transport and infrastructure
- 4: Broadband/mobile phone connectivity
- 5: Future of farming/agri-food sector



New development in rural areas must be managed to support the delivery of a “sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active”. The location of new housing and community facilities is an important consideration of delivering this and the planning system plays an essential role in this.

What are the main opportunities facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years?

From the list RTPI NI selected the following challenges by priority:

- 1 (Most significant): Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland
- 2: Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy)
- 3: Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g. Broadband and emerging technologies) (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs)
- 4: Transport infrastructure and services
- 5: Revitalisation of towns and villages

RTPI NI welcomes the recognition that a joined-up approach from Government is an opportunity. Joined-up delivery is essential and offers a more effective and efficient approach. It should also be recognised that there are stakeholders outside Government who should be included in the joined-up approach. The Councils in delivering their planning responsibilities are an essential part of the jigsaw for rural areas.

Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship: To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish

Rural areas offer specific opportunities - focusing on natural resources, forestry, agriculture and tourism – and innovation and entrepreneurship which can promote these specific areas should be welcomed to support the sustainable opportunities offered by rural areas to benefit health and well-being and reduce social isolation and rural poverty.

For this to be achieved, policy must be proactive and it must be done in a sustainable manner. Investing in our current rural economies will create further opportunities and a better outlook for people living in these areas, additionally giving young people the choice to remain in rural areas instead of finding work elsewhere, as stated in the proposed framework ‘rural areas should be recognised as places of opportunity’

The points that are stated above are all vital needs to boost the current situation of decline within the rural areas in Northern Ireland. It is important to give people options and possibilities.

A missing emphasis in Pillar 1 is the direct link between the economy and the natural environment. Rural areas can play a significant role in addressing climate change both by the rural economy itself (agriculture, forestry etc.) and approaches to rural

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A well-resourced, plan-led, positive planning service can bring together objectives across services



development in protecting the economy overall and communities through, for example, flood management, biodiversity and renewable energy generation. Currently the strategy focuses the natural environment solely on the tourism sector, which should be expanded more widely.

Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism: To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment

Tourism is a major contributor to Northern Ireland's economy, and with the recent decline in tourism due to covid-19, this has been widely recognised. However, tourism has a huge impact on not only the economy but socially and environmentally, therefore sustainable tourism should be promoted to protect what Northern Ireland has to offer and ensure it can be built upon in the future within a strong rural policy framework.

Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing: To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers

Rural areas can feature less within policy as they are not the main traditional economic leads, however it is important to understand the need to provide services for the communities that live within rural areas, which in Northern Ireland's case is a large percentage of the population. It has been identified that there can be many vulnerable people that are suffering from social isolation and rural poverty due to little access to basic and public services. This thematic approach is vital to promote health and wellbeing within rural communities to reduce the issues highlighted within rural areas.

Planning must be recognised as a tool to help promote connectivity and accessibility in rural areas instead of planning being thought of as a barrier. The planning system is a vital tool in the delivery of this Pillar; Regional planning policy (the Strategic Planning Policy Statement – SPPS) and Local Development Plans (LDPs) are important mechanisms for delivery on rural needs and should be recognised by the Rural Policy Framework.

The Framework should integrate with planning policy in removing the support for single dwellings in the countryside – unless directly linked to rural enterprise - which exacerbate the problem of social isolation and the cost of providing public services to households. Instead Government policy should emphasise that housing should be focused on towns and villages.

Thematic Pillar 4: Employment: To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas

Rural areas offer opportunities beyond agriculture and the provision of support for promoting job and innovative opportunities in rural areas can promote sustainability for current and future generations and remove the current barrier that people may

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experience when it comes to employment including accessibility, connectivity and skills. Providing employment opportunities in rural areas improves the sustainability of the areas, providing an improved basis for other community services, including schools.

Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity: To improve connectivity between rural and urban area

Connectivity is vital for rural areas and should be a priority for rural areas. RTPI NI welcomes the recognition that there should be sustainable connections between urban and rural areas. There should also be a focus on developing strong public transport links to reduce the need for private car journeys.

What are your views on how the Five Thematic Pillars should be prioritised?

RTPI NI's ranking for the five Thematic Pillars is (with the top priority as 1):

- 1: Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity
- 2: Thematic Pillar 4: Employment
- 3: Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing
- 4: Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship
- 5: Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism

The 14 Key Principles outlined below are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland

If these 14 principles are correctly and proactively applied, then they are appropriate for the rural framework. They highlight the need to tackle rural poverty and social isolation which is a priority, and they highlight the need for community planning which will help promote engagement and understanding of the current issues people are experiencing in rural areas. It is also important that long term strategies are put in place to achieve sustainability for the future of rural communities. Rural communities today are experiencing many challenges, however rural planning can address this issue through the development of policy and practice objectives, through the achievement of sustainable development which is vital. Covid-19 has had a huge effect on rural communities, however, the change in work patterns and restrictions limiting people travelling any amount of distance has helped people understand the importance of local services. There is also the impression that with more people working from home they may relocate to rural areas which will have a future effect on the rural housing market which will need careful management.

The RTPI have published a paper on 20-minute neighbourhoods in Scotland but has wider applicability. It recognises the application of 20 minute neighbourhoods in a rural context, "where settlement hierarchies already play an important role in allocating development in well-served settlements, alongside a general policy steer away from

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individual developments in isolated areas". www.rtpi.org.uk/research/2021/march/20-minute-neighbourhoods/

The RTPI is currently commissioning research which will seek to address how rural planning will need to change to deal with the challenges which rural communities are facing in the 2020s, as well as how rural communities can meet policy and practice objectives for achieving sustainable development. This research will include a focus on Northern Ireland to ensure its applicability.

Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

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