

*These notes refer to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland)
2016 (c.19) which received Royal Assent on 9 May 2016*

Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

EXPLANATORY NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. These Explanatory Notes relate to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 which received Royal Assent on 9 May 2016. They have been prepared by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (“the Department”) in order to assist the reader in understanding the Act. They do not form part of the Act and have not been endorsed by the Assembly.
2. The Notes need to be read in conjunction with the Act. They are not, and are not meant to be, a comprehensive description of the Act. So where a section or part of a section does not seem to require an explanation or comment, none is given.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. The Northern Ireland Executive has been committed to undertaking rural proofing of all its strategies and policies since 2002. This commitment was reaffirmed in 2009. As part of the Rural White Paper Action Plan, the Executive included a commitment to strive for a fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life as all others in the region. It sought to do this by supporting the implementation of an enhanced rural proofing process across government to ensure that all major policies and strategies are assessed to determine whether they have a differential impact on rural areas and, where appropriate, make adjustments to take account of particular rural circumstances.
4. The policy objectives of the Act are to require the effective implementation of rural proofing across public authorities; establish the role of the Department in providing advice and guidance on rural proofing; require information and data on rural proofing to be made available in a transparent way in a report to be laid before the Assembly; and put in place effective arrangements for co-operation and sharing best practice between all public authorities covered by the Act.

OVERVIEW

5. This is an Act to impose a duty on certain public authorities to have due regard to rural needs; and for connected purposes.
6. The Act has 7 sections and 1 Schedule.

COMMENTARY ON SECTIONS

Section 1: Duty of public authorities to have due regard to rural needs

Section 1 imposes a statutory duty on those public authorities listed in the Schedule to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services. This section also makes provision for the Department to review the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule and amend the list to add or remove a body or person exercising functions of a public nature to the Schedule or to modify any entry in the Schedule (by way of an order laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly).

Section 2: Guidance, advice and information, etc.

Section 2 provides an enabling power for the Department to provide guidance, advice and information about issues connected with rural needs or ways of meeting those needs. It also provides the Department with the power to undertake, commission or support (by financial means or otherwise) research into any matter relating to rural needs.

Section 3: Monitoring and reporting

Section 3 imposes a statutory duty on public authorities to compile information on the exercise of its functions under Section 1 of the Act, to include that information in its annual report and to provide that information to the Department. Section 3 further imposes a statutory duty on the Department to publish an annual report on both the information sent to it by the other public authorities and information on the exercise of its own functions under the Act, and for that report to be laid before the Assembly. Section 3 places a requirement on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement to the Assembly on the content of the annual report.

Section 4: Co-operation with other bodies

Section 4 makes provision for the Department to make arrangements with other public authorities with a view to securing co-operation and the exchange of information.

Schedule: Public Authorities for the purposes of this Act

The Schedule lists the bodies and persons who are public authorities for the purposes of the Act.

HANSARD REPORTS

7. The following table sets out the dates of the Hansard reports for each stage of the Act's passage through the Assembly.

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<i>STAGE</i>	<i>DATE</i>
Briefing on the proposed Bill to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development	3 November 2015
First Stage	9 November 2015
Second Stage	17 November 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	24 November 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from Local Rural Support Networks	24 November 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from the Rural Development Council and the Rural Community Network	24 November 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives Northern Ireland	24 November 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from the Ulster Farmers’ Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association	24 November 2015
Committee Stage – consideration of evidence and key issues	1 December 2015
Committee Stage – evidence from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	8 December 2015
Committee Stage – informal clause-by-clause consideration	14 December 2015
Committee Stage – formal clause-by-clause consideration	12 January 2016
Committee Stage – consideration of committee report	19 January 2016
Committee Stage – agreement of committee report	26 January 2016
Committee’s report on the Act – report number NIA 288/11-16	26 January 2016
Consideration Stage	15 February 2016
Further Consideration Stage	29 February 2016
Final Stage	8 March 2016
Royal Assent	9 May 2016