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.

Northern Ireland Civil Service, The Executive Office

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.

Development of a cross-Executive Artificial Intelligence Strategy for Northern Ireland, setting out a strategic framework for the safe, ethical and effective adoption of AI across the public sector.

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

Developing a	Policy		Strategy	X	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.

Northern Ireland's Artificial Intelligence Strategy

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

The Strategy aims to establish principles, governance and an enabling framework for the responsible adoption of AI across the Northern Ireland public sector. It seeks to improve public services, support innovation, build capability and ensure that AI is developed and deployed in a safe, fair, transparent and accountable manner.

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.

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

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

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 Strategy is strategic and enabling in nature and does not directly deliver services. However, it will influence how AI-enabled public services are designed and delivered across Northern Ireland, including in rural areas.

As such, it may have indirect impacts on people in rural areas, particularly in relation to access to digital services, infrastructure, and the way in which services are delivered or accessed in future.

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 Strategy recognises that people in rural areas may experience public services differently due to factors such as geographic isolation, transport links and digital connectivity.

There is potential for differential impacts where AI-enabled services rely on digital access, connectivity or digital skills, as rural populations may be more affected by:
- lower availability or quality of broadband or mobile connectivity;
- greater reliance on digital access where physical services are less accessible; and
- longer travel distances to access in-person alternatives.

These differences are not caused by the Strategy itself but are relevant to how AI-enabled services may be experienced during implementation.

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	X
Education or Training in Rural Areas	
Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas	X
Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas	X
Health or Social Care Services in Rural Areas	
Poverty in Rural Areas	
Deprivation in Rural Areas	
Rural Crime or Community Safety	
Rural Development	X
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.

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

Evidence sources include:

- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) data on digital skills and access;
- Evidence referenced in the AI Strategy consultation document relating to digital exclusion and connectivity;
- DAERA Rural Needs Act guidance and rural statistics;
- Existing evidence on rural service accessibility, including issues relating to transport, infrastructure and broadband coverage.

These sources highlight known rural issues including digital connectivity, access to services, and infrastructure constraints.

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

Relevant rural needs identified include:

- Reliable access to digital infrastructure, including broadband and mobile connectivity;
- Ability to access public services where distance and transport may be barriers;
- Availability of alternative (non-digital) service channels where digital access is limited;
- Ensuring that new service models do not disproportionately disadvantage rural users;
- Supporting equitable access to skills, including digital and AI literacy.

These needs reflect the social and economic requirement to ensure that people in rural areas can access public services on a comparable basis to urban populations.

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?

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.

In considering rural needs, the following issues were identified:

- The potential for AI-enabled services to increase reliance on digital access, which may disproportionately affect rural users where connectivity is lower;
- The importance of ensuring that services remain accessible through alternative channels and do not become exclusively digital by default;
- Differences in how services are accessed in rural areas, including longer travel times and reduced access to physical service points;
- The need to ensure fairness and inclusivity in the design and deployment of AI systems, including consideration of geographic and infrastructure differences.

As the Strategy is enabling in nature, these issues are primarily relevant to future implementation rather than the Strategy itself.

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 [X] **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 Strategy has been influenced by consideration of rural needs through its emphasis on:

- inclusive, accessible and user-centred design principles;
- avoiding “digital by default” approaches without appropriate alternatives;
- ensuring fairness, transparency and accountability in AI-enabled services;
- recognising digital inclusion and connectivity as key risks and priority areas;
- embedding governance arrangements which require further assessment (including equality and rural considerations) at implementation stage.

While the Strategy does not prescribe specific service models, it establishes a framework that is intended to ensure that future AI-enabled services are designed in a way that takes account of rural needs and avoids disproportionate disadvantage.

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.

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:	Adam Steed
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Division/Branch	Office of AI & Digital
Signature:	Adam Steed
Date:	12/06/2026
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	Louise Long
Position/Grade:	Director of the Office of Science & Technology
Division/Branch:	Office of Science & Technology
Signature:	Louise Long
Date:	13/06/2026