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.

The Department of Finance.

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.

Review and implementation of the Hybrid Working Policy for NICS to provide a consistent approach to hybrid working across the service via the implementation of a 40% Minimum attendance requirement. The review will help continue to realise the benefits of hybrid working for both staff and the organisation.

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	X	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.

NICS Hybrid Working policy

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

To implement a minimum 40% workplace attendance requirement across all depts in the NICS. To simplify the request process for staff and managers. To clarify issues raised with the existing policy e.g. decision making, part time staff. Meet changing business needs and support better work-life balance. Promote the development of modern agile workplace environments.

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.

NA

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

NA

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

NA

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 NICS implemented hybrid working during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hybrid working is a blend of the designated workplace, other work or remote locations; or home.

Connect2 Hubs provide workplaces in rural locations to help bridge the gap between the workplace and home. The facilities provide staff with the ability to use the drop-in spaces where they can connect to people, technology, and the office without having to travel to their designated workplace location.

For staff in rural areas whose roles are suitable for hybrid working, the policy will allow them to request a hybrid workstyle agreement. This means that staff can work from home/remotely up to 60% of their contracted working hours, thus reducing the need for daily commuting and should reduce the time, expense and carbon emissions associated with commuting and have the potential to have a positive environmental impact on NI.

Hybrid working has potential to generate increased footfall in regional areas. As a consequence, it will play a part along with the Connect2 hubs in promoting local economic development and regeneration thereby helping to address regional imbalance. Many NICS staff live in rural areas (as defined as a settlement of less than 5,000 population).

The Hybrid Working Policy will also support NICS employment opportunities for people in areas who previously may not have applied for jobs due to long travel distances. The policy will support the NICS in being an employer of choice and help attract external applicants who value flexibility in working.

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 Hybrid Working Policy is intended to have similar outcomes for people in rural areas as in urban areas as it is open to all NICS staff and agency employees. The positive impacts may be greater for rural dwellers as statistics show that:

1) Workers from rural areas commute longer than urban workers; and

2) improved access to full fibre broadband and increased download speeds delivered through Project Stratum will provide greater access to the opportunity/potential to work from home or from another remote location.

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)	Internal impact with minor environmental impact for NI

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.

NA

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	[ ]
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.

- Review of DAERA statistics
- Key rural issues Northern Ireland 2024
- Broadband Access and Uptake in NI - Jan 2021 (2).pdf (daera-ni.gov.uk)
- The Northern Ireland Travel Survey (in depth Report)
- To determine the most appropriate locations for Connect2 hubs, NICS staff commuter data was analysed by Ordnance Survey NI (OSNI) and the DOF RPM Team.

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

A DAERA report includes the following information on rural areas.

- **Longer commutes -** The Travel Survey NI for 2016-18 revealed that workers from rural areas had an average commute of around 50% further than workers in towns and cities, and travelled on average more than 500 additional miles per year to their workplace. Technological advances have enabled some workers to minimise the impact of the daily commute and work from home, and for workers in more remote rural areas this might seem a particularly attractive option.

- **Broadband** - Broadband availability and average download speeds have increased dramatically in recent years largely due to the ongoing rollout of Project Stratum which is now nearing completion. This joint initiative by DAERA and DfE aimed to extend Next Generation Access (NGA) to premises across Northern Ireland. As of 2024, Northern Ireland has the highest availability (93% of premises) of full-fibre services of the four UK nations, ahead of England (69%), Wales (68%) and Scotland (62%).

  In 2025, DfE is preparing to implement Project Gigabit to serve premises outside of the scope of Project Stratum. Recent investment in digital infrastructure has narrowed the urban/rural gap in broadband availability considerably - in 2024, 98% of rural homes in NI had access to superfast speeds, from 66% in 2020.

  Access to full-fibre broadband connections has increased rapidly in both urban and rural areas since 2018. In 2024 this is approaching full coverage with 93% of residential properties able to access this service, and 86% of NI rural households having access to a full-fibre connection, from just 17% in 2020. There has been a substantial drop in the number of properties unable to achieve a 'decent' broadband connection from either a fixed or fixed wireless access (FWA) network. Ofcom estimates that in 2024, the NI figure is stands at fewer than 2,000 premises (residential and commercial), or approximately 0.2% of all premises.

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?

NA

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 Hybrid Working Policy is aimed at all NICS staff and facilitates arrangements (dependent on business needs) blending working from staff's designated workplace, other work or remote locations; or home. Hybrid working by its blended nature requires staff to attend their workplace for part of each working week. The term 'workplace' is used to indicate an individual's designated office, where it is necessary to conduct official business, or other work, or remote location (other than your home) specifically agreed by line management.

To consider the extent of commuting and determine the most appropriate locations for Connect2 hubs, NICS staff commuter data was analysed by Ordnance Survey NI (OSNI) and the RPM Team. The findings highlighted optimum Connect2 locations to maximise demand and reduce the need for long commutes (which may have greater impact for rural dwellers). Taking the findings into consideration and taking cognisance of addressing regional imbalance and ensuring Connect2s are available across all regions, the following locations were selected for Connect2 development:

- Ballykelly
- Ballymena
- Bangor
- Craigavon
- Downpatrick
- Omagh

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 Hybrid Working Policy has taken account of rural needs (and the needs of all staff) by considering the commuting patterns in the NICS and aiming to provide as much flexibility as possible. In tandem, rural needs have been considered by ensuring that the Connect2 hubs are placed in optimal locations to reduce commute times for all staff including rural dwellers and to provide enhanced technology in regional locations which will enable staff in rural areas to avail of access to high quality broadband.

The Hybrid Working Policy makes it possible for job vacancies within the NICS to be advertised outlining the extent of remote working possible within roles. This should increase NICS employment opportunities for people in rural areas who previously may not have applied for jobs due to long commuting distances.

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.

NA

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:	Redacted Section 40(2)
Position/Grade:	Staff Officer
Division/Branch	People & Organisational Development
Signature:	Redacted Section 40(2)
Date:	13/03/25
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	
Position/Grade:	G7
Division/Branch:	People & Organisational Development
Signature:	Jayne Forster
Date:	25/03/25