



Rural Policy Framework Consultation Response

Q1: Do you agree that the proposed overarching aim 'To create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work and be active' for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland is appropriate?

No

Additional Comments:

NFFN supports the idea of creating a sustainable rural community, however this will only happen if the environment is a central pillar to this overarching aim. With just over a third of Northern Ireland's population living in rural areas, and rural areas making up 80% of Northern Ireland's landmass, there is a clear requirement for any future rural development to put the environment at its core.

This aim must also be framed within the context of a changing food and farming landscape. Agriculture accounts for 75% of all land use in Northern Ireland and is the backbone of the rural economy. For example, any changes to rural development policy must be consistent with the new funding model that will replace the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). NFFN's position is that future agricultural policy should be based on the concept of public money for public goods, with payment schemes that are sufficient in supporting farmers to enhance the natural environment and promote prosperous and resilient rural communities. This aligns with the key outcomes presented in the Future Agricultural Policy Framework, which talks about recognising and rewarding public goods provided by farmers and making agri-environment a core element of future policy.

To live and to be active in a rural community, people need a reason to be there. This framework should not only ensure prosperous livelihoods for rural dwellers, but also ensure there is a strong connection to nature, which can enhance a community's sense of place, health, and wellbeing. Job creation and rural enterprise should also be developed in a way that delivers for nature, climate, and people. Rural workers need to be seen as valuable assets within their communities, particularly young people, who may need a reason to stay.

Q2: Do you agree that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) approach should continue under the wider umbrella of the Rural Policy Framework?

Yes

Additional Comments:

Farmers are a key group within our rural communities in Northern Ireland. They have to deal with the same challenges that many people living in rural areas face on a day to day basis. These can include geographical and social isolation due to the dispersed nature of rural communities and a shrinking rural population, higher fuel and transport costs, reduced access to healthcare and business support services, and inadequate provision of IT and communication services (mobile network coverage and broadband). Uncertainties over future agricultural policy and financial support for the industry, and trading and supply chain issues caused by Brexit, have added to farmers' worries, potentially putting them and their families under significant financial and emotional stress.

NFFN therefore believes that it is vital that farmers continue to receive support through TRPSI initiatives such as Rural Business Development Grants and the Farm Family Health Check Programme as part of a future Rural Policy Framework.

Q3: In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years? Please select what you feel are the top five challenges from the options outlined below.

1. Climate change and environmental sustainability
2. Future of farming/agri-food sector
3. Changing demographics (e.g. ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas)
4. Jobs and business
5. Managing tourism in a sustainable way

Options not selected: Access to public services (e.g. health, education and social services); Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups; Broadband/mobile phone connectivity; Transport and infrastructure.

Q4: In your opinion, what are the main opportunities facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years? Please select what you feel are the top five opportunities from the options outlined below.

1. Diversification within farming/agri-food sector
2. Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g. renewable energy)
3. Economic development of markets (local, national and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging)
4. Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland
5. Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g. Broadband and emerging technologies) (e.g. remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs)

Options not selected: Enabling communities (e.g. supporting local leadership, groups and volunteers, enhancing community amenities); Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g. Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs); Revitalisation of towns and villages; Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation and activity tourism; Transport infrastructure and services.

Q5: Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship: To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.

a. Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Yes

Additional Comments:

None

b. Do you agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *Develop a culture of rural innovation*
- *Raise awareness, build capacity and capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation*
- *Invest in and develop our rural economy*

Yes

Additional Comments:

NFFN believes that it is essential that the Rural Policy Framework commits to providing an environment in which rural innovation is encouraged and appropriately supported.

Falling farm incomes and anticipated changes to the way agricultural financial support will be delivered in future, mean that for many farmers it will become increasingly important to think innovatively and seek opportunities to diversify their farm businesses.

NFFN advocates for and supports farmers to adopt practices which allow them to manage their farms in ways that encourage nature to thrive, whilst still maintaining financially sustainable businesses. This "less is more" approach whereby farmers protect the natural assets on their farms by optimising their use of inputs (fertiliser, pesticides, animal feeds etc.) to achieve "Maximum Sustainable Output", has the potential to enable farmer to make additional financial returns from their land through receiving payments for providing environmental public goods such as carbon sequestration, air and water quality management and flood risk mitigation.

Technological innovation and nature-based solutions on farms should be prioritised. In terms of nature-based solutions, rural areas are well-placed to deliver nature restoration at scale, which can play a direct role in tackling the nature and climate crises. Some examples include, projects to restore peatlands, hedgerows and woodlands and incentives to encourage farmers to undertake sensitive grazing on native grassland, and agroforestry measures which can boost environmental and economic resilience

Where farms are being managed in a nature friendly way, this can provide opportunities for nature based tourism through providing on-farm accommodation, guided walks, self-guided trails or other wildlife watching facilities. Farmers producing nature friendly, sustainable produce can market their products as such and hopefully received a premium price either selling direct from their farms, through farm shops or local farmers markets. Both on-farm products like high-protein crops and flax, and non-farm products like crafts, forage, cider, and honey have seen recent interest which could help develop a Northern Ireland sustainable brand and bolster food tourism.

The diversification activities outlined can all help to boost farm business income, however most farmers and their families would require practical support and advice, as well as financial assistance to give them the confidence to try adopting these more innovative approaches. This includes removing potential barriers to diversification, such as poor connectivity and restrictive rules around what constitutes "active farming".

Q6: Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism: To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.

a. Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Yes

Additional Comments:

None

b. Do you agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *Encourage and support the delivery of compelling year-round, authentic visitor products and experiences of a quality that will provide international stand out for Northern Ireland;*
- *Support a rural tourism sector that is commercially focused and achieves sustainable levels of growth and prosperity;*
- *Facilitate welcoming and supportive rural communities to play an enhanced role in developing and managing tourism in their locality, thereby strengthening, benefitting and enriching local areas;*
- *Recognise, value, protect and enhance Northern Ireland's natural, cultural and historic built environment as the cornerstone of its rural tourism.*

Yes

Additional Comments:

NFFN agrees that developing and maintaining a sustainable rural tourism sector in Northern Ireland can play an important role in ensuring the long-term prosperity and vitality of our rural communities. We welcome the inclusion of the environment as a priority area of intervention within tourism, but this should be approached with care. Sustainable growth within the sector must be achieved through a clear set of boundaries to prevent extractive tourism. This includes ensuring that the capacity of local attractions is not exceeded during busy seasons and that the natural environment, particularly areas containing priority habitats, are not degraded.

That said, our natural, cultural and historic built environment has great potential for providing a wide range of bespoke visitor experiences and products that would appeal to audiences from across the UK and Ireland and beyond. A growth in rural tourism would help to create jobs in rural communities, boost regional and local income and create markets for the sale of distinct local food, drink and other produce. The creation of locally branded produce can have economic multiplier effects, retaining tourism expenditures within a local economy.

As previously mentioned, farmers are well placed to benefit from sustainable growth in rural tourism through offering nature-based experiences, farm tours, on-farm accommodation, farm shops etc., provided that appropriate support and advice is available. However, in order to create a truly sustainable rural tourism sector in Northern Ireland we must place a high value on the protection and enhancement of our natural assets and ensure that we don't inadvertently cause further environmental degradation in pursuit of growth and prosperity.

Q7: 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.

a. Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Yes

Additional Comments:

None

b. Do you agree that the five priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *Champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation and loneliness*
- *Support a rural dimension within the work of other organisations which are promoting positive health and wellbeing, addressing social exclusion, isolation and loneliness and build the capacity of rural organisations and people to develop their activities in this area;*
- *Establish effective approaches to reducing loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of social isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers;*
- *Sustain the future viability of villages as social and economic centres;*
- *Support the strategic development of existing rural community assets as places where people can meet, interact, access services and enhance their health and wellbeing.*

Yes

Additional Comments:

As previously stated, farmer have to deal with the same challenges that many people living in rural areas face on a day to day basis. These can include geographical and social isolation due to the dispersed nature of rural communities and a shrinking rural population. Uncertainties over future agricultural policy and financial support for the industry, and trading and supply chain issues caused by Brexit, have added to farmers' worries, potentially putting them and their families under significant financial and emotional stress.

NFFN believes that it is vital for the Rural Policy Framework to acknowledge these challenges and create structures for the provision of local services and support within rural communities to address social exclusion, isolation and loneliness.

One way in which the farming community can help to address some of these issues is through providing access to green space. Living through the Covid pandemic of the past 18 months has led to an increased awareness of how important easy access to green space is for people's health and wellbeing. Responsible, well managed access to farmland can deliver a wide range of

mental and physical health benefits through having the opportunity to exercise outdoors and spend time in nature. Unlike other UK jurisdictions and the rest of Ireland, there is no system of Public Rights of Way across land in Northern Ireland, and very strong opposition to any form of wider public access. There is a strong emphasis on the rights rather than the responsibilities that accompany the possession of land. A short-term solution to this issue would be the introduction of more permissive paths on private land. Longer term, land reform legislation, such as that seen in Scotland would be the most effective way to establish responsible access to land.

Taking this a step further, social farming or other similar growing schemes have the potential to bring whole communities together. Working collectively in the fresh air and getting back in touch with nature has been shown to have a really positive impact on people's health and wellbeing, particularly for individuals who are recovering from issues such as family bereavement, addiction or long-term unemployment.

Q8: Thematic Pillar 4: Employment: To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.

a. Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 4: Employment is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Yes

Additional Comments:

None

b. Do you agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 4: Employment are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *To promote rural prosperity by providing support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability and growth*
- *To champion the need to address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers*
- *To invest in and develop our rural society*

Yes

Additional Comments:

NFFN would argue that with appropriate investment and support, there is potential for the provision of employment opportunities in rural areas across both farming and non-farming enterprises. Lack of good employment options, particularly for young people, is one of the key drivers of rural depopulation which must be addressed if we are to maintain thriving, sustainable communities.

Green jobs associated with landscape scale nature projects (e.g. peatland restoration), nature-based tourism activities and provision of eco-friendly accommodation (on or off farm) have great potential to create employment opportunities. More and more people are beginning to appreciate the value of our natural environment and becoming increasingly conscious of the impact that their consumer choices have upon it. As we make the transition to a net-zero society there will also be jobs created in the renewable energy and carbon capture and storage industries. These jobs don't necessarily have to all be based in urban areas, particularly if support was provided to enable business start-ups.

The creation of a Green Jobs Scheme would be a welcome move, particularly in light of the impact that COVID-19 has had on employment opportunities in rural areas.

It is also important that as we move towards more sustainable practices in rural communities there is support for a "just transition". Providing substantial financial support and re-training/re-skilling opportunities for those employed in affected industries (e.g. commercial peat extraction) will be crucial so as to avoid worsening rural poverty.

Investment and support to enable farm businesses to diversify would help to provide additional employment, for example through the establishment of open farms, farm shops, on-farm butcheries, or direct delivery supply chains.

Reform of agricultural policy to make it easier for young people with an interest in farming to get started would also be beneficial in terms of job creation and addressing the increasingly elderly demographic within the industry. Measures could include making publicly owned (DAERA, NIEA, local council) land available to new entrants, moving away from the Conacre system of annually renewed seasonal agreements to longer term lets (min. 5-10 years), and a initiative to match up potential new farming entrants with farmers who are approaching retirement but have no succession plan.

Q9: Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity: To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.

a. Do you agree that Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

Yes

Additional Comments:

None

b. Do you agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *To support sustainable public transport services between rural areas and urban centres and encourage active and public transport usage that better meets the needs of rural dwellers.*
- *To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres.*

- *To support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live.*
- *To reduce barriers to accessing services in rural areas*

Yes

Additional Comments:

NFFN supports the need for greater connectivity in rural areas, particularly in relation to telecommunications infrastructure. With so much of our communications and business activities now conducted online, it is essential that people living and working in rural areas are not disadvantaged by poor mobile phone network coverage and slow, unreliable broadband speeds.

Farmers looking to diversify their businesses need to be able to communicate effectively and responsively with their customers, to promote their products and services and to respond to customer enquiries. A significant proportion of this communication now takes place via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, where being able to share visual content, including videos, is vital. This relies upon having a reliable, fast enough broadband connection to upload content.

Improving access to community services such as health and social care, counselling, financial advice or other kinds of support groups is also important, particularly given the many pressures that farmers face, often without much external support.

Q10: What are your views on how the five thematic pillars should be prioritised, ranked by priority from 1-5 (with 1 being the highest priority and 5 being the lowest priority)?

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

Q11: Do you agree that the 14 Key Principles outlined below are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland?

- *Address the needs of rural communities through the delivery of outcomes based initiatives which provide value for money and also contribute to the outcomes set out in the draft Programme for Government 2016-21 (PfG);*
- *Promote the piloting of new and innovative approaches to the challenges facing rural communities;*

- *Encourage partnership working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector;*
- *Recognise the important role played by the rural community sector and the need to encourage rural community empowerment;*
- *Encourage the mainstreaming of successful projects and the development of suitable exit strategies;*
- *Complement other rural initiatives including the Rural Needs Act 2016;*
- *Be cognisant of the fact that all Departments have responsibilities for rural areas;*
- *Promote sustainability through support for projects which deliver long term benefits for rural communities;*
- *Seek to promote equality and good relations in line with the Department's duties under Section 75;*
- *Seek to complement the aims and objectives of other key Executive policies and strategies including the Draft PfG and the New Decade, New Approach Deal;*
- *Promote the sharing of information (in line with UK data protection legislation), learning and best practice between organisations;*
- *Seek to complement the community planning process;*
- *Recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis; and*
- *The Framework will seek to use the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (TRPSI) delivery approach under the wider umbrella of Thematic Pillar 3.*

Yes

Additional Comments:

Whilst NFFN doesn't disagree with any of the 14 Key Principles outlined, we would argue that they fail to recognise that any initiatives or actions taken to create sustainable rural communities must have environmental sustainability at their core. If we don't seek to protect, restore and enhance our shared natural resources then our rural areas cannot thrive in the long-term.

We are already beginning to see the effects of climate change in Northern Ireland, with average summer temperatures increasing and prolonged dry spells becoming more frequent. Meanwhile, the abundance and distribution of a wide range of wildlife species continue to decline and contract.

Nature is our greatest asset for creating a sustainable future for rural communities. If we don't treat it as such, then we will reduce our tourism potential and opportunities to promote innovation and entrepreneurship. Consequently, there will be fewer job opportunities and people's health and wellbeing will suffer, leading to further depopulation and loss of connectivity.

Q12: Are there any other aspects of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Yes

Additional Comments:

As per our response to Q11, NFFN feels that the Rural Policy Framework as a whole doesn't place enough emphasis on the need for any initiatives or actions resulting from the framework to be framed within a core guiding principle of environmental sustainability.

We would argue that there should be a sixth thematic pillar with Environmental Sustainability as its focus.

Q13: Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DAERA in relation to Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland in respect of:

a. The Equality and Human Rights Screening Template

No

b. The Rural Needs Impact Assessment

No