

Appendix I - 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.

Sport Northern Ireland (Sport NI)

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.

System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027)

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

Developing a	Policy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strategy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Plan <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Adopting a	Policy <input type="checkbox"/>	Strategy <input type="checkbox"/>	Plan <input type="checkbox"/>
Implementing a	Policy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strategy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Plan <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Revising a	Policy <input type="checkbox"/>	Strategy <input type="checkbox"/>	Plan <input type="checkbox"/>
Designing a Public Service	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Delivering a Public Service	<input type="checkbox"/>		

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.

System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027)

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

This programme aims to build a sustainable and inclusive sporting system in Northern Ireland, delivered through investment into National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGB's). Its objectives are to:

- increase participation and retention, with a focus on underrepresented groups such as women, girls, disabled people, and those in rural communities
- create sustainable pathways linking schools, clubs, and communities, ensuring lifelong participation opportunities in line with the Active Living Strategy
- support performance progression, enabling talented athletes from all areas, including rural communities, to move from grassroots to elite levels
- strengthen governance, safeguarding, and workforce capacity, ensuring that NGBs are well-equipped to deliver safe, inclusive, and resilient sport.

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).

☒

Other Definition (Provide details and the rationale below).

☐

A definition of 'rural' is not applicable.

☐

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

N/A

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural.'

N/A

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

N/A

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 ☒ 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 System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027) is expected to have a significant positive impact on people living in rural areas, across both participation and performance pathways ([Sport NI Strategic Context](#)). By investing strategically in NGBs, Sport NI will support NGBs to address the challenges facing rural communities in several ways:

Strengthening rural club networks and volunteer capacity

Rural clubs are often the backbone of local communities, but they rely heavily on volunteers for governance, coaching, and administration. The programme will help NGBs invest in volunteer recruitment, retention, and training, building sustainability in line with Sport NI's People and Clubs Framework and ensuring that rural communities are not left behind.

Enabling flexible and innovative delivery models

Recognising the geographic spread of rural communities, the programme will encourage NGBs to pilot new approaches such as mobile outreach sessions, school-club partnerships, satellite clubs, and shared community facility use. These approaches mirror best practice in Sport England's Uniting the Movement strategy, which emphasises local solutions for rural participation.

Improving inclusion and diversity in rural sport

Rural clubs can play a crucial role in extending opportunities to underrepresented groups. Programme investment will support NGBs in adapting provision to ensure women and girls, disabled people, ethnic minority communities, and older adults can fully participate. This aligns with Section 75 duties under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and builds on Sport NI's Women in Sport and Disability Sport action plans. The programme requires NGBs to demonstrate how rural women, girls, and disabled people are being actively engaged through adapted provision and localised opportunities.

Creating sustainable participation opportunities

By increasing participation opportunities programme will help people in rural areas to sustain lifelong engagement in sport. This will contribute directly to NI Executive outcomes on healthier communities, reduced inequalities, and stronger rural economies. Evidence from <https://www.sportireland.ie/clubs> shows that strengthening participation at community level also generates wider benefits such as improved mental health, community cohesion, and rural regeneration.

In summary, rural communities are explicitly considered in the design and delivery of this programme. The programme will help reduce the gap between rural and urban participation, enhance local resilience, and position sport as a driver of well-being, inclusion, and social capital in rural Northern Ireland.

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 System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027) is designed to strengthen participation and performance pathways across Northern Ireland. While the overall aim is to create a more inclusive and sustainable sporting system, the impact in rural areas is likely to differ from urban areas because of distinct structural and demographic factors.

Potential areas of impact include:

- **Participation Opportunities**
The programme may help increase opportunities for people in rural communities by supporting outreach initiatives, shared facility use, and partnerships with schools and community organisations (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/rural-policy-framework-northern-ireland>).
- **Accessibility and Travel**
Flexible delivery models such as satellite clubs and localised sessions could reduce travel burdens, which are typically greater in rural areas (<https://www.sportni.net/sport-research/people-and-clubs-framework/>).
- **Club Sustainability**
Investment may enable rural clubs to collaborate regionally, share resources, and strengthen volunteer networks, addressing challenges linked to smaller populations and limited financial resilience (<https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/area-explorer-2021/>).
- **Digital Inclusion**
Encouraging blended approaches could help mitigate connectivity issues in rural areas, supporting online learning and administration (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/key-rural-issues-2024/>).
- **Performance Pathways**
Rural athletes may benefit from clearer progression routes and improved support structures, although geographic and resource constraints could still influence access (<https://www.sportni.net/sport-research/uk-wide-talent-and-performance-pathway-inclusion-research-project/strategic-context/>).

Overall, the programme is expected to address some of the barriers faced by rural communities, but the extent of impact will depend on how Governing Bodies implement localised solutions and adapt delivery models.

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	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jobs or Employment in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Education or Training in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health or Social Care Services in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poverty in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Deprivation in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Rural Crime or Community Safety	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Agri-Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please state)	<input type="text" value="Sport participation/development opportunities and retention within NGB performance pathways"/>

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.

N/A

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 ☒ 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	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Published Statistics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Consultation with Other Organisations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Research Papers	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Surveys or Questionnaires	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other Publications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other Methods or Information Sources (include details in Question 3C below).			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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.

Sport Northern Ireland has drawn on a range of quantitative data sources, qualitative evidence, and stakeholder consultation to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas relevant to the System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027).

Through analysis of research, survey data, programme monitoring returns, consultation feedback, and policy analysis, Sport NI has developed a robust evidence base on rural needs. This ensures that the programme is informed not only by statistical trends but also by the lived experiences of rural communities and the organisations that serve them.

The key methods and sources include: Appendix A - List of Rural Related Research, Publications and Other Information¹; Appendix B - List of Rural Related Research

- Appendix B - [Urban-Rural Health Inequalities in NI](#) (November 2022)
- [Equality Impact Assessment – System Partners Programme: National Governing Bodies Programme \(2025\)](#)
- [Equality-Impact-Assessment-Sport-NI-Corporate-Plan.pdf](#)
- DAERA - [Key Rural Issues 2024](#)
- DAERA - [Key Rural Issues 2023](#)
- Continuous Household Survey 2023/24: Rural v Urban Participation: [experience-of-sport-by-adults-in-northern-ireland-202324.xlsx](#)
- **Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland (DAERA, 2022):** Identified access to services, transport, digital connectivity, and community sustainability as key cross-cutting priorities, which were factored into this RNIA ([DAERA Rural Policy Framework](#)).
- **NISRA Data**
 - [Census Area Explorer](#)
 - [Northern Ireland Local Statistics Explorer](#)
 - [PiG Wellbeing Framework](#)
 - [Making Life Better | NISRA](#)
 - [Social, Economic and Environment Indicators](#)
- **Sport NI Consultation and Engagement**
 - Consultation Workshops with Governing Bodies (July–September 2025): NGB representatives highlighted key challenges in rural delivery, including travel distances, volunteer reliance, and access to suitable facilities.
 - Direct engagement with rural clubs, local authorities, and community organisations provided qualitative insights into barriers such as affordability, facility access, and digital connectivity
- **Sport NI Programme Monitoring Data**
 - Sports System Investment in Governing Bodies (SSIGB) Monitoring Data 2024–25: Captures membership, participation, and workforce figures submitted by Governing Bodies. Returns provide direct evidence of reach into rural clubs, workforce pressures, and resource allocation.
 - NGB self-assessment data on facility use, volunteer capacity, and geographic distribution of participants has been analysed to highlight rural disparities.
- **Active Lives Survey (Sport England)** and **Irish Sports Monitor (Sport Ireland)** were reviewed for comparability. Both reinforce the pattern of lower participation rates in rural areas, providing external validation of NI-specific findings.
- **Sport NI Insight Reports and Research**
 - Sport NI's internal insight publications, including the People and Clubs Framework (2024), provide analysis of participation trends, workforce development, and facility access in rural communities.
 - [NISRA GIS Mapping and Small-Area Statistics](#) were used to identify sport and physical activity provision relative to population density across rural settlements.

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

Survey data, programme monitoring, and consultation highlight key social and economic challenges shaping the System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027)

- **Participation Inequalities**
Rural participation rates remain lower than urban areas ([experience-of-sport-by-adults-in-northern-ireland-202324.xlsx](#))
 - 3% greater participation in urban areas within past year, with a 2% greater participation in urban areas within past four weeks
 - 3% greater participation and walking in urban area within past year, with a 4% greater participation and walking in urban area within past year
- **Club Sustainability**
Smaller rural clubs face financial fragility due to limited income streams and reliance on modest fees (<https://www.sportni.net/sports-strategy/>).
- **Travel & Transport Barriers**
Longer distances and higher costs restrict access to training and competition (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/rural-policy-framework-northern-ireland>).
- **Volunteer Pressures**
Heavy dependence on volunteers, compounded by ageing populations and recruitment challenges (<https://www.sportni.net/volunteering/>).
- **Facilities & Access**
Limited dedicated facilities; reliance on shared spaces reduces quality and availability (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/data-zone-boundaries-gis-format>).
- **Digital Connectivity**
Poor broadband limits online learning and club management (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/key-rural-issues-2024>).
- **Cost of Participation**
Travel, equipment, and facility hire costs disproportionately impact rural families (<https://www.sportireland.ie/ism-2024>).

Conclusion:

These structural disadvantages require tailored investment and flexible delivery models. Embedding these considerations into the NGB Programme will reduce inequalities, strengthen resilience, and ensure rural communities benefit fully from sport.

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?

N/A

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 designing the System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027) Sport Northern Ireland has carefully considered a range of social and economic issues that specifically affect rural communities. These considerations shaped both the programme framework and the requirements placed on Governing Bodies during application and assessment.

Reaching Rural Participants

It was recognised that rural communities often face barriers to participation due to limited facilities, smaller populations, and transport challenges. The programme therefore requires NGBs to demonstrate how their programmes will engage participants in rural areas, with an emphasis on adapting delivery to overcome these challenges. This includes a focus on outreach sessions, partnerships with schools, and shared facility arrangements.

Proportional Recognition of Smaller NGBs

Smaller Governing Bodies with a rural footprint often have fewer staff and limited delivery capacity. To ensure fairness, Sport NI's assessment process applies proportional recognition, meaning that smaller organisations are not disadvantaged by scale when evidencing impact. Their qualitative evidence - such as reach into rural clubs, local partnerships, and community-level outcomes - is assessed in proportion to their size and resources.

Flexible Delivery Models

To address geographic barriers, the programme encourages innovative delivery approaches such as satellite clubs, pop-up activities, and blended digital/face-to-face models. This reflects best practice identified in both Sport England's Uniting the Movement and Sport Ireland's community-based outreach initiatives, which highlight the effectiveness of localised solutions in rural settings.

Workforce Investment for Rural Volunteers

Workforce investment covers coaches, officials, and administrators based in rural areas. Sport NI funding can support NGB-led rural training events, mentoring schemes, and online learning, helping volunteers in remote areas gain the same qualifications and safeguarding training as those in urban settings.

Digital Access and Inclusion

'Blended' refers to combining online learning and digital tools with in-person delivery. NGBs will be supported to partner with schools, councils, and libraries that already provide digital access, ensuring rural participants can complete online coaching, governance, or workforce training. While the programme does not directly fund digital hubs, it enables NGBs to collaborate with existing local resources to improve inclusion.

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 ☒ 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 development and design of the System Partners Investment – National Governing Body Programme (2026–2027) has been directly shaped by the rural needs identified through data analysis, consultation, and policy review.
- Importantly, the statutory duty under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 rests with Sport NI as the public authority.
- National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are not themselves bound by the Act, but as delivery partners they are required, through programme conditions, to demonstrate how they will respond to rural needs in their own plans.
- This distinction means that Sport NI discharges its statutory responsibility by embedding rural considerations into the programme framework, while NGBs are responsible for implementing provision on the ground. Key adaptations influenced by rural needs include:

Framing Rural Access as a Priority Group Consideration

- Rural participants are formally identified as a priority group within the participation strand. NGBs must show how their programmes will address rural barriers such as transport, affordability, and facility limitations. Sport NI aim to monitor this group through postcode analysis of participation data and by reviewing annual reports from each Governing Body.

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.

N/A

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:	Robbie Geary
Position/Grade:	Deputy Principal
Division/Branch	Sport NI
Signature:	<i>R. Geary</i>
Date:	17/09/2025
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	Rebecca Hope
Position/Grade:	Interim Director of Sport (G6)
Division/Branch:	Sport NI
Signature:	<i>R. Hope</i>
Date:	05.02.2026