

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 Performance Policy

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 ☐	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.

System Partners Investment Performance Policy

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

The Sport NI Performance Sport Policy provides a framework for how Sport NI will invest in athletes, people, systems and performance environments to strengthen performance sport and improve international sporting outcomes for Northern Ireland athletes. The policy establishes a clear, transparent and evidence-led approach to investment, ensuring that public resources are directed where they can have the greatest impact on athlete progression and performance. The primary objective of the policy is to increase the number of Northern Ireland athletes making sustained transitions into appropriate Senior National Programme and High Performance environments. Supporting objectives include strengthening recognised performance pathways, improving the quality of training and competition environments, developing coaches and performance support personnel, improving accessibility and inclusion, and ensuring that investment demonstrates clear impact and value for money.

The policy focuses Sport NI investment on areas where it can make the greatest additional contribution by addressing evidenced performance gaps and supporting athletes at critical stages of their development. The policy also seeks to ensure that opportunities within the performance pathway are equitable and accessible to athletes regardless of geography, socioeconomic circumstances, disability, sex or background.

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 Sport Northern Ireland Performance Sport Policy is likely to impact on people living in rural areas through the way it shapes future investment decisions, athlete support, workforce development and access to performance pathway opportunities across Northern Ireland. The policy provides the framework through which Sport NI will invest in athletes, coaches, performance staff, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and performance environments to support progression towards senior international competition.

Athletes, coaches and volunteers living in rural communities can face additional challenges in accessing high-performance opportunities due to factors such as greater travel distances, reduced proximity to specialist facilities and services, higher participation costs, and fewer opportunities to engage in structured performance environments. These factors can affect an individual's ability to progress through the performance pathway and realise their sporting potential. The policy recognises that barriers associated with geography can influence progression and therefore seeks to support equitable access to performance opportunities across Northern Ireland.

The policy's focus on addressing evidenced performance gaps, supporting recognised performance pathways and investing in critical transition points will help create opportunities for talented athletes from both rural and urban communities. Investment may support athlete development, coaching capability, workforce development, specialist performance services and performance environments that improve the quality and accessibility of support available to individuals living outside major population centres.

The policy is also expected to positively impact rural communities through its commitment to equity, inclusion and accessibility. By recognising barriers associated with geography, disability, socioeconomic circumstances and other factors, the policy seeks to ensure that investment decisions are not solely influenced by location but by evidenced need, performance potential and the ability of support to make a meaningful contribution to athlete progression.

In addition, investment in coaches, technical staff and performance environments can strengthen local sporting infrastructure and capability. This may help increase the availability of expertise and support within rural communities, reducing reliance on travel and enabling more athletes to access appropriate development opportunities closer to where they live.

Overall, the Performance Sport Policy is expected to have a positive impact on people living in rural areas by supporting fairer access to performance sport opportunities, improving pathways for talented athletes, strengthening coaching and workforce capacity, and ensuring that individuals from all parts of Northern Ireland have the opportunity to progress towards senior international competition regardless of geographic location.

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 Sport Northern Ireland Performance Sport Policy is likely to impact people living in rural areas differently from those living in urban areas because athletes, coaches and support personnel in rural communities often face additional barriers to engaging with performance sport and accessing progression opportunities within recognised performance pathways. These barriers can affect both the cost and practicality of participation and progression.

People living in rural areas may have to travel greater distances to access specialist coaching, performance support services, training facilities, competitions and development opportunities. As a result, rural athletes and their families can incur higher costs relating to travel, accommodation and time commitments than those living closer to major population centres. Rural athletes may therefore be disproportionately affected by decisions relating to the location, availability and accessibility of services and support.

The policy's focus on addressing evidenced performance gaps, supporting athlete development and investing in coaches, performance staff and performance environments is expected to have a proportionately greater positive impact on rural communities. By investing in pathway development, workforce capability and targeted athlete support, the policy can help reduce geographic disadvantages and improve access to opportunities for people living outside major urban areas.

The policy may also have a different impact on athletes with disabilities living in rural areas. These athletes can face additional challenges due to the availability of specialist facilities, equipment and support services. The policy's commitment to inclusive and accessible performance pathways has the potential to help address some of these barriers and improve progression opportunities for athletes with disabilities regardless of location.

Rural National Governing Bodies, clubs and performance environments may also benefit differently from investment under the policy. Workforce development, coach education, partnership working and access to specialist expertise can help strengthen local capability and improve the quality of support available within rural communities. This may contribute to more sustainable performance pathways and reduce the need for athletes to relocate or travel extensively to access appropriate support.

Overall, while the policy is intended to benefit athletes and sporting organisations across Northern Ireland, it is likely to have a proportionately greater impact on rural communities by helping to address barriers associated with geography, travel, access to services, workforce capacity and progression opportunities. The policy's commitment to equitable opportunity recognises these challenges and seeks to ensure that talented athletes can progress through the performance pathway regardless of where they live in Northern Ireland.

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)

Sport participation/development opportunities and retention within 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	☒	Published Statistics	☒
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.

Sport NI has considered the following information on rural needs:

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 – NGB Programme (2026–2031). 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: Rural Related Research, Publications and Other Information; [Urban-Rural Health Inequalities in NI](#) (November 2022); [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](#); [PfG Wellbeing Framework](#); [Making Life Better | NISRA](#); [Social, Economic and Environment Indicators](#)).

Sport NI has considered the engagement and consultation data: 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 has been considered: Athlete Awards, Nationally Funded Athletes, Pathway data, System Investment in Governing Bodies (SSIGB) Monitoring Data 2024–25 has been considered

Sport NI Insight Reports and Research has also been considered:

Sport NI's funded research has also been considered.

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

Sport Northern Ireland identified a number of social and economic needs relevant to people living in rural areas which may affect their ability to access and progress within performance sport pathways.

- **Participation Inequalities**
Rural participation rates remain lower than urban areas [experience-of-sport-by-adults-in-northern-ireland-202425.ods](#) by 3%
- **Reduced Athlete Support from Club Sustainability**
reduced club support for rural athletes. 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>).
- **Reduced support from Volunteer Pressures**
Athletes have reduced support in rural areas. Heavy dependence on volunteers, compounded by ageing populations and recruitment challenges (<https://www.sportni.net/volunteering/>).
- **Facilities & Access**
Athletes have limited access to dedicated facilities; reliance on shared spaces reduces quality and availability (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/data-zone-boundaries-gis-format>) and the need to travel is greater.
- **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>).

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.

Sport Northern Ireland considered a range of social and economic issues that may affect the ability of people living in rural areas to access, engage with and progress through performance sport pathways. Particular consideration was given to the potential impact of geography on athlete development, coach development, access to services and progression opportunities within the performance system

The key issues considered included:

- **Access to Performance Pathways:** Athletes living in rural communities may have fewer opportunities to access structured performance environments, specialist coaching, competition opportunities and talent development programmes due to their location.
- **Travel and Transport Requirements:** Rural athletes, coaches and support personnel often need to travel greater distances to access training venues, competitions, camps, performance services and development opportunities. This can create additional financial and time pressures that may affect progression and retention within the performance pathway.
- **Access to Specialist Performance Support:** Individuals living in rural areas may have reduced access to sports science, sports medicine, strength and conditioning, nutrition, psychology and other specialist services that contribute to athlete development and performance.
- **Workforce Development and Coach Capacity:** Rural sporting environments may have fewer opportunities to access coaching development, mentoring, networking and specialist expertise. Consideration was therefore given to how investment in coaches and performance staff could strengthen pathway quality across Northern Ireland.
- **Cost and Affordability:** Additional travel, accommodation and participation costs can create barriers for athletes and families living in rural communities. These costs may affect an individual's ability to engage fully in performance programmes and competitions.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** Consideration was given to the potential impact of geography on athletes who may already experience barriers to progression, including athletes with disabilities, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and underrepresented groups. The policy recognises the importance of addressing barriers that may prevent individuals from demonstrating or realising their potential.
- **Availability of Facilities and Training Environments:** Access to high-quality facilities and performance environments can vary significantly across Northern Ireland. The policy considered the importance of ensuring that talented athletes are not disadvantaged because of where they live.
- **Partnership Working and Coordinated Support:** Consideration was given to the role of National Governing Bodies, performance agencies, local partners and other stakeholders in ensuring that support is accessible and coordinated for athletes and coaches across both rural and urban communities.

These issues informed consideration of how Sport NI investment can be targeted to address evidenced performance gaps, support equitable access to development opportunities and remove barriers that may disproportionately affect athletes, coaches and support personnel living in rural areas. The policy recognises that geography can influence progression opportunities and seeks to ensure that investment decisions support talented individuals from all parts of Northern Ireland to progress towards senior international performance environments

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 of the Sport Northern Ireland Performance Sport Policy has been influenced by consideration of the barriers and challenges that can affect athletes, coaches and support personnel living in rural areas. Evidence gathered through research, stakeholder engagement, programme monitoring and policy analysis identified a number of issues including travel and transport challenges, access to specialist facilities and services, workforce capacity, affordability and the impact of geography on progression through performance pathways. These considerations informed the development of the policy and its investment principles.

The policy has been designed to focus investment on addressing evidenced performance gaps and supporting athletes at key transition points within the performance pathway. In doing so, the policy recognises that talented athletes may face different barriers depending on their location and seeks to ensure that investment decisions are informed by need, potential and likely impact rather than proximity to major population centres.

The policy's commitment to equitable opportunity has been particularly influenced by the needs identified through the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process. The policy explicitly recognises that barriers associated with geography, disability and socioeconomic circumstances can affect athlete progression and requires Sport NI to identify and respond to material barriers that may prevent individuals from demonstrating or realising their potential.

Consideration of rural needs has also influenced the policy's approach to workforce development, coach support, performance environments and partnerships. The policy supports investment in coaches, performance practitioners, specialist services and collaborative working arrangements that can strengthen pathway quality and improve access to expertise across Northern Ireland, including within rural communities.

The policy further recognises the importance of ensuring that athletes from all parts of Northern Ireland have access to appropriate development opportunities and support. Through ongoing monitoring, review and evidence-based decision making, Sport NI will continue to assess whether investment arrangements are supporting equitable access to performance pathway opportunities and whether additional actions are required to address barriers experienced by individuals living in rural areas.

Overall, the policy has been influenced by the rural needs identified through the assessment process by embedding principles of equity, accessibility, additionality and evidence-led investment, helping to ensure that talented athletes can progress through the performance pathway regardless of where they live in Northern Ireland.

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:	Stephanie Henderson
Position/Grade:	Deputy Principle
Division/Branch	Sport NI
Signature:	<i>Stephanie Henderson</i>
Date:	14/09/2026
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	Rebecca Hope
Position/Grade:	Interim Director of Sport
Division/Branch:	Sport NI
Signature:	<i>R. Hope</i>
Date:	16.09.26