

**DAERA Rural Policy
Strand 3 – Championing Rural Communities
Working Group Meeting 1
01 July 2025
Greenmount College – Walled Garden Studio**

“Working Together To Create A Thriving & Sustainable Rural Northern Ireland”

This note has been prepared by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) as a record of the Stand 3 – Championing Rural Communities Working Group meeting (attendees appended at Annex A) held on 01 July 2025 as part of the process leading to the development of a new rural policy for Northern Ireland.

Attendance

Appended at Annex A

Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Nicholas McCrickard - RSN (Brieger Conway deputising)
Elaine Gillespie – SOLACE (Lisa O’Malley deputising for meeting 2 [03/07/2025])
Prof Siobhan O’Neill – Mental Health Champion (Neil Goodwin deputising)
Dr Rosemary McKee – DAERA Climate Change – Will attend afternoon session.

Annex A contains a list of those who participated in the Championing Rural Communities Working Group Meeting 1.

Introduction & Welcome – Louise Coyle - Co-Chair

A welcome was extended to the working group. The Co-Chair set the scene and context for Meeting 1 and agreed with the Championing Rural Communities Working Group the desired outputs from Meeting 1.

Agenda & Broad Aims for the Workshop – Alison Monteith (SIB)

SIB went through the Agenda, timings etc, for the day and stated that the broad aim of the day was to arrive at a consensus on what a Rural Champions Model might look like.

Opening Remarks – John White – Co-Chair

After brief introductions the Co-Chair made some opening remarks about the context of the process since this was the first meeting of this group. There would be three further meetings on 3rd, 21st and 22nd July. It was stressed that this process was to be inclusive and not rushed and that the principle of co-design was paramount. This was to include other government departments and key stakeholders. The rural policy was being developed in the context of the

ending of the previous Rural Development Programmes and in the changed landscape that that has brought about. The Minister has requested that any approach to the new rural policy be evidence based and this is one of the reasons for the workshop approach.

Part of the context is that the new policy is not intended to be a like for like replacement of RDP. The group should also take into account straitened budgetary issues that face all government departments. The new policy is intended to be long term i.e. 10-15 years and therefore the co-design approach is crucial to this.

The three key strands are:

- Support
- Understand
- Champion

The background to the work so far in engagement with groups was given. The process is a collective one and is not departmental led. All government departments are represented in the process.

The Co-Chair invited questions on what he had outlined. The group members were content with what they had heard.

Terms of Reference & Future Workplan – Alison Monteith (SIB)

SIB outlined the Working Group's values and behaviours:

- Ownership
- Accountability
- Communication
- Freedom
- Innovation
- Flexibility

SIB also detailed the current Working Group objectives:

- To develop proposals for a new Rural Champions Model.
- To develop proposals to improve the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.
- To develop proposals for improving the capacity and capability to champion rural at policy and delivery level.

It was pointed out that group members should be aware that the group is engaged in developing a new Rural Champions Model (plural).

These objectives are not set in stone and can be amended as the process runs its course. The key questions are:

- “How can DAERA champion rural needs better?”
- “How can a structure be developed to address key issues as they arise?”

The draft workplan for the four planned meeting was presented and agreed by the group with the proviso that it would be re-visited and could be amended later in the day.

Rural Champion in NI – Presentation & Facilitated Discussion – Nigel Quinn (DAERA) Presentation – Alison Monteith (SIB) Facilitation

DAERA delivered a presentation on the history of rural policy and rural champion in N Ireland. Rural Champion has its roots in the then DARD Rural Strategy of 2007-2013. Six roles were proposed:

- Advocate
- Watchdog/Mainstreamer
- Listener
- Advisor
- Initiator
- Exemplar

Rural Champion role has been limited in recent years.

There is no formal Executive agreement for DAERA to fulfil the role of Rural Champion.

The Inter-Departmental Committee on Rural Policy ceased in 2016 and since then there has been no formal structure in place to allow DAERA to engage with other departments on a strategic level.

During the discussion around this issue it was noted that rural was a low priority in many other jurisdictions. The groups need to work out what it is that they want to achieve.

It was suggested that in N Ireland that the RDP took over as government policy when it was really a series of programmes and initiatives to be delivered.

There followed a break out facilitated discussion. The WG split into two sub-groups. Group 1 examined what had worked well in rural policy over the years and group 2 looked at what the challenges and barriers were to delivering effective rural policy in N Ireland.

Feedback

Group 1

- Should DAERA actually lead on the Rural Champions?
- Who should the “watchdog” be?
- You can’t be a “watchdog” and a “champion”.
- Who will be the “watchdog”? The watchdog role in England was discontinued.
- There needs to be a “statistician” role as the Minister has asked policy to be evidence based. This needs to be extended across other departments.
- The Rural Needs Act brought rural to the table in a formal way.
- Increased visibility and awareness of rural issues.
- TRPSI has been a very good resource – Well managed and fulfilled the “listener” role.

This led to a wider WG discussion which focused on better communication of rural good news stories and how rural needs to be “intentional” in its communications. Surely this is championing.

There are plenty of good news stories out there.

Better communication must be part of the role of the rural champions.

The point was made that there is a need to gather evidence of what other departments are doing well in rural.

Rural championing is “everybody’s business” and it shouldn’t always be about the “bad stuff”.

Group 2

Is rural a policy priority, if so, what is the policy?

We need good qualitative and quantitative evidence to support any new policy.

Most decisions are now budget based and the received wisdom is that rural costs more as a policy than other areas. But does that just mean that it costs more to give rural come equity?

There is a lack of recognition of work that goes on outside of formal government activity, e.g. community group initiatives. Is there a role for these organisations to fill the gap of an informal champion”?

We need to sell good practice more and better.

Rural Champions need sufficiently resourced and to have influence on other departments.

The community/voluntary sector are suffering from “consultation fatigue”.

Rural Champion in Other Jurisdictions – Presentation & Discussion – Professor Sally Shortall (Newcastle University)

Professor Shortall outlined practice in other jurisdictions around rural championing. Detail was given on initiatives in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

Key points:

RoI

There have been some very interesting reports published by ERSI.

You cannot devise policy in the absence of a definition of rural.

Responsibility for rural moving to local authorities.

“Our Rural Future” strategy is disjointed from other policies.

Wales

More of a focus on developing and connecting regions.

Future Wales – National Plan 2040 has interesting moves on rural and urban development.
Trying to develop a sense of place for Wales – Does the Welsh/English border have anything we could learn from in proximity of NI/RoI??
A sense that people still want to live near where they grew up.

England

There is a new National Rural Taskforce
Much of the responsibility for rural is devolved to local authorities.

Scotland

A Rural Stakeholder Group that was established during Covid still meets quarterly.

Scottish Rural & Island Parliament meets every two years and has a Youth Parliament attached.

It is hosting the European Rural Parliament in 2025. Is this something NI could do in the future?

The Scottish government fund three key organisations – Scottish Rural Action, Scottish Rural Network and Community Led Local Development – all three are currently being evaluated and there may be lessons for NI from the conclusions of those evaluations.

Scotland is launching a new Rural Delivery Plan in the summer of 2025.

Main observations:

- Regions constantly redesigning, reviewing rural policy practices
- Welsh area development approach
- Scotland reviewing the organisations it funds
- Policy design is different
- DRCD (RoI) over consult and this is seen as a challenge
- Farming organisations and academics are seen as stakeholders for rural policy in all the other regions

Possible Models for Rural Champions – Presentation – Maria Bradley (DAERA)

DAERA gave an overview of other “champion type” models in N Ireland that the Rural Policy might learn from:

- Mental Health Champion
- NICS Community Policy
- Commissioner for Older People
- Commissioner for Children & Young People
- Independent Autism Reviewer
- Children Looked After Champion in Education
- Climate Change Commissioner
- Transition Commission towards the Climate Change Act

There was a wider discussion around these points – key discussion points were:

DAERA is leading this process and possible may have oversight but is not solely responsible

Does The Executive Office have a role?

Rural policy needs a structure that leads back to the Executive

The structure of NI government where all departments have a separate legal mandate may work against cross cutting departmental work.

All departments will prioritise what they are statutorily bound to deliver.

But legislation can be a driver to bring people to the table.

Mental Health Champion for NI – Presentation – Neil Goodwin (Mental Health Champion NI)

Mental Health Champion for NI established in 2020.

Budget £495,000 pa (£55k per department)

Mandate is to promote mental well being, reduce stigma, influence policy

Not a delivery agent and does not represent individuals

Provides core functions:

- Public Advocate
- Government Adviser
- Constructive Challenger
- Consensus Builder
- Strategic Hub

Lessons for a Rural Champion Model:

- Cross-departmental support is critical
- Independence with clear governance
- Focus on strategic influence, not direct service
- Set realistic expectations
- Resourcing must match ambition

Wider Facilitated Discussion on Rural Champions Model – Alison Monteith (SIB)

SIB facilitated a wider discussion on what group members had heard during the day.

Again the issue of a definition of “rural” was highlighted. “Rural” is a huge issue just like “environment”.

Interaction with other departments can be difficult if they think you’re seeking part of their very tight budget. But all government departments are represented in the working groups.

How do we get “rural” into every aspect of government?

Is there a rural dimension of all aspects of life? E.g., is there a rural dimension to identity, sexual orientation, language, culture or should there be some issues “left out” of rural?

Do we need a completely new model? That would be a challenge. It must complement and add value to the Rural Needs Act.

What would a realistic budget be? This is the remit of another WG.

Wider Facilitated Discussion on Purpose, Scope & Outcomes of Rural Champions Models – Alison Monteith (SIB)

SIB facilitated a discussion to review the Terms of Reference, Workplan and Objectives discussed earlier in the morning. Key discussion points:

Objective 1 – to develop proposals for a new Rural Champions Model

Are the objectives of a new rural champions model appropriate and fit for purpose?
What would a new model look like?

One of the government departments represented stated that it would not be a big move for them to get involved in a new rural champions model.

Other group members questioned whether the Rural Champions Model needed to sit in central government.

Objective 2 – To develop proposals to improve the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Is there any scope to amend the Rural Needs Act? Will the Minister be open to this if it is a conclusion of the WG?

This WG can only inform a wider review of the Act. Can we suggest that?

What is the role of DAERA in the actual implementation of the Act?

These issues should form part of the discussions in the remaining 3 meetings.

Objective 3 – To develop proposals for improving the capacity and capability to champion rural at a policy and delivery level.

This led to a wide ranging discussion of the wording of this objective which some WG members felt to be confusing.

What do we mean by “capacity” and “capability”? Does capacity mean the number of people delivering a task or the personal skills they might have or require?

It was pointed out that the wording of this objective had been changed to make it less narrow.

Whose responsibility will it be to deliver policy?

Will stakeholders be resourced for this?

Stakeholders have skills and people – They require more funding/resources for delivery.

A discussion took place over the wording of this objective and the following was agreed:

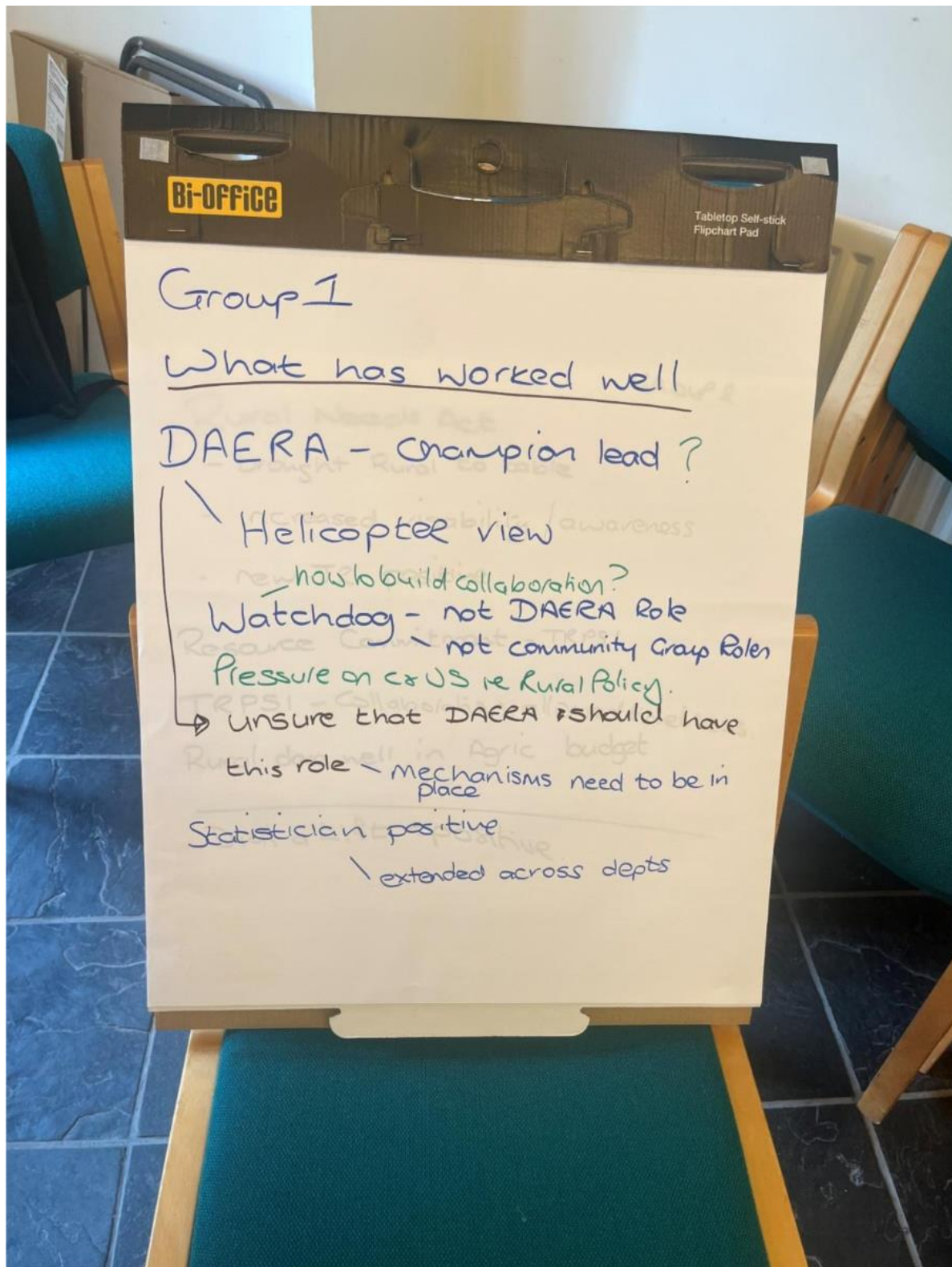
“To develop proposals for improving capacity of relevant stakeholder organisations to champion rural at a policy and delivery level.”

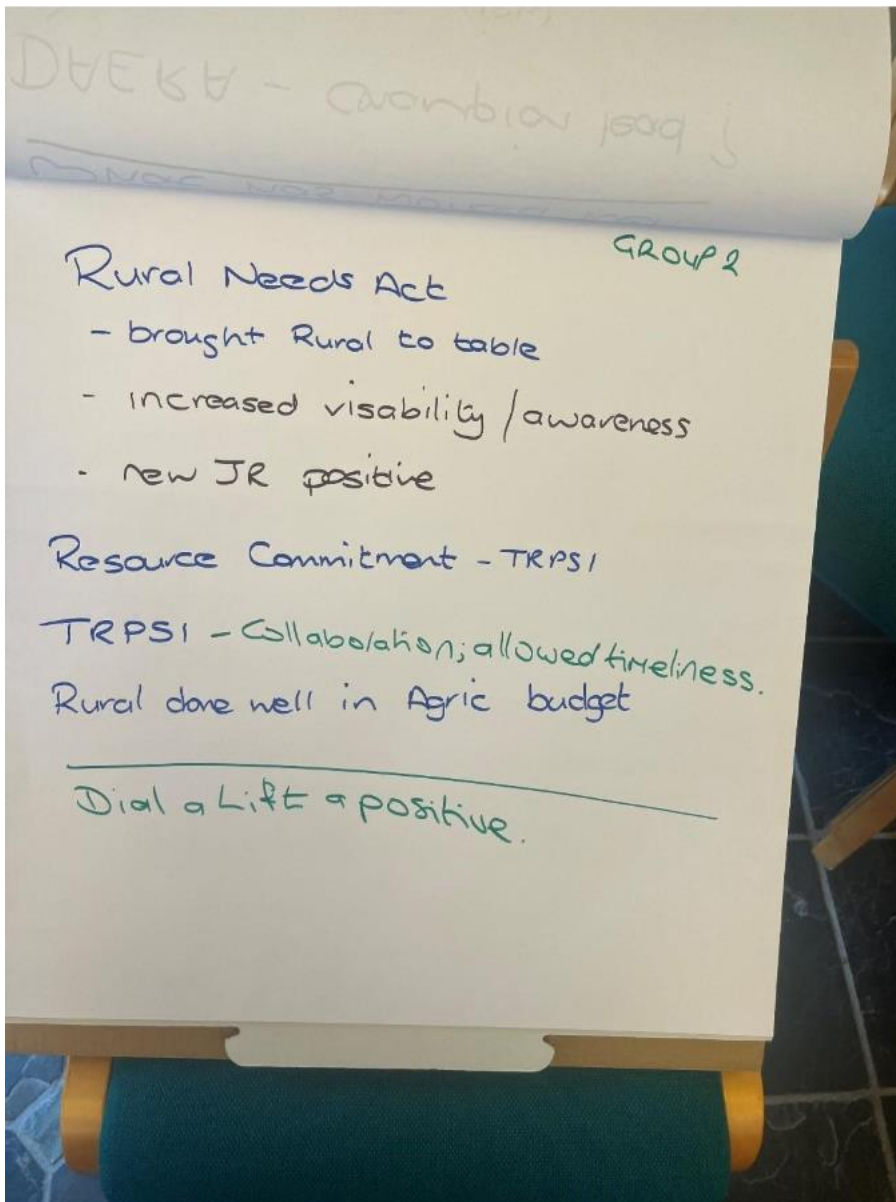
The workplan and ToR were also agreed at this stage.

Closing Remarks - DAERA

The Deputy Director for Rural Affairs thanked members for their contributions and confirmed that the next meeting of the Rural Champions Working Group would be on 3rd July 2025 in Greenmount College and asked members to note a change of venue within Greenmount.

Flip Chart Materials





DHEKA - Caution 1000

GROUP 2

Rural Needs Act

- brought Rural to table
- increased visibility / awareness
- new JR positive

Resource Commitment - TRPSI

TRPSI - Collaboration; allowed timeliness.

Rural done well in Agric budget

Dial a Lift a positive.

GROUP 2.
CHALLENGES / BARRIERS

- BUDGET CONSTRAINTS
- LACK OF QUANTITATIVE + QUALITATIVE DATA
- POLICY PRIORITIES
- LACK OF RECOGNITION ^{WORK OF} RURAL COMMUNITIES (INFORMAL CHAMPIONING ROLE)
- Sell good practice - Exemplars.
- IMPORTANCE HAVING BUDGET ASSOC. TO RURAL CHAMPION TO HELP INFLUENCE OTHER DEPARTMENTS.

RURAL WHITE PAPER.

- could be an engagement mechanism.

DAERA Championing Rural Communities

Working Group 2

03 July 2025

Greenmount College

Item 1: Welcome and Opening Remarks

The Co-chair opened the Working Group Meeting 2 and welcomed its members.

Apologies were recorded from Nicholas Mc Crickard (Briega Conway deputised), Elaine Gillespie (Lissa O'Malley deputised), Kiera Lloyd (Gavin Irwin deputised), Siobhan O'Neill (Neil Goodwin deputised) and Cormac Doherty

Annex A confirms the participants in the Meeting 2.

Item 2: Key Elements of a Rural Stakeholder Model

The SIB facilitator led the Working Groups/ through the agenda and the process set out within it to achieve the Working Group Meeting 2 outcomes. SIB provided an overview of the work and discussion from Meeting 1 (1st July 2025). No meeting note from Meeting 1 was presented on the basis of the one day gap between Meeting 1 and 2. Both meeting notes will be prepared and circulated prior to Meeting 3.

The Co-chair asked for the Working Group members for reflections from Meeting 1. The SIB facilitator opened the discussion which generated the following comments/discussion points:

- Try and think of ways to promote the good work that DEARA does. We often commence with a narrative that much of what we do is 'average' or out of line with 'good/best' practice. We need to acknowledge and reference the good rural practices and interventions in NI as well as identifying areas of work which we can improve upon
- Could we get an organisation such as OECD to do an external review of current DAERA led rural development policy?
- It was acknowledged that synergies are emerging across the Working Groups e.g. Understanding is examining a key annual rural conference (promoting good practice in NI and introducing innovative/new practice from other jurisdictions)...this relates to the discussion in this Working Group
- Concept of Championing ... it's not that other Departments or public bodies don't want to; it's often that they are not sure how to or that we don't give them access to information to better understand rural or introduce practices which are effective in meeting the needs in rural communities

SIB facilitated two groups to discuss different draft outcome statements. The feedback provided is summarised below:

- Policy cycle ... gathering evidence (proposals from the Understanding Rural Working Group). It would provide a resource for the Rural Champion(s)
- Discussion on whether the Rural Champion role is wider than the Public Sector and should also focus on local government and the community and voluntary sector
- Discussion that both draft statements are too deficit focused ... needs to be cognisant of the good/positives in our rural communities and the opportunities (natural tourism/Green Growth)
- Need to understand and recognise the diversity (types) of rural communities
- Potential that the Rural Champion role/model/function could be so wide that it might be too difficult to manage/resource. Should the Champion role/function focus on a number of key/agreed themes.....identified via evidence, data and qualitative research
- Need to have clarity on what we want to achieve (our outcomes for the Rural Champion function/ role)
- The Rural Needs Act places emphasis on others to consider rural. The Champion role should/must be about much more than compliance with the Rural Needs Act

Discussion on Scope

Discussion on other models e.g. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA)... will have developed and agreed priorities and countries will report back on these priorities.

It was suggested that the Working Group examine the purpose and scope of championing models in other jurisdictions or from other policy arenas. Working Group members were asked to share any options or models worth considering before the next meeting.

The Working Group members shared some purpose statements from other jurisdictions for consideration. It was agreed that these will be circulated.

DEARA presented a number of other alternatives (based on the outputs of the Working Group discussions via the break out groups) and it was agreed that these will be circulated prior to the next meeting.

The discussion noted that all of the alternatives examined or produced in the session were positive in their language.

Annex B contains the versions developed or shared during the discussion and group work.

Item 3: Stakeholder Engagement with Government/ Interpretation Engagement and Community Planning

A prepared paper was presented on challenges and good practice. It included an overview of a survey which identified the perception of rural as an issue or challenge (how it is addressed by our departments or presented/discussed in the media). This initiated a discussion on the size and nature of the survey quoted in the paper.

The discussion acknowledged that despite any limitations that there might be on the sample size it remains an issue which the Championing role might address.

Discussion identified that DEARA (Rural Needs Act) has been trying to engage with other public bodies and has been engaging over the long term. The Working Group wanted to identify why or what are the constraints?

- Rural people and communities still feel they are an afterthought
- It's about the intention of those who 'say' they seek to engage
- Dependent on the Minister/political direction or the nature of political collaboration at any part in time
- Too many examples of failed processes; communities engaged and views still not accurately captured and reflected e.g. three versions of an NI Childcare engagement process and yet no strategy; communities have lost faith in the process
- If people are to be engaged, they have to feel valued and their time valued ... tokenistic processes have created apathy

Overview of Rural Support Networks was presented to establish the approaches they take in engaging rural communities and stakeholders. Key points from the presentation included:

- Local structure, understanding and connections
- Collaborative working
- Influenced decisions ... perhaps less policy
- Reactive and agile
- Potential power imbalance due to Department (core) funding the Rural Support Workers
- Track record built up
- Engagement works when there is respect, time and a recognition of the resources required by small organisations to become involved in engagement processes
- Risk that networks (RSNS and NIRWN) can raise expectations and generate work which they do not have the resources to deliver.

Discussion felt that there needs to be a recognition that we are all part of an infrastructure trying to engage, understand, support and deliver for rural.

The risk around the Championing role is that everyone will expect the Rural Champion role/person(s) to fix every rural issue once they have communicated with that Champion.

Discussion considered an Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy which was established in 2009 and ceased when Stormont was suspended in 2017. This was perceived as a strategic engagement platform for DEARA to engage with each of the other 11 Departments.

Discussion followed on why this Interdepartmental Committee did not fully achieve its potential. Some believed there was a lack of focus and clarity and not a sufficiently well-developed agenda. With the loss of focus the consistency (frequency and grade of the departmental representatives) attendance/engagement became ad hoc. If we propose to establish something similar, we need to learn from these lessons. It was Chaired by the Minister but was de facto a Civil Service Committee; perhaps it should be chaired by senior Civil Servant.

The discussion also focused on the need for all departmental representatives to be at each meeting; should they be thematic and therefore those who need to attend are more likely to do so as they have both something to contribute and something to gain?

There was no investment from stakeholders, the academic sector and specialists. This was probably constraint as DEARA officials (and those of other Departments) tend to be generalists.

There are too many cross departmental groups that it becomes difficult to service.

If there is a cross departmental committee, it is important to be delineated about its purpose. If this type of committee or model is to be successful, the Working Group discussion focused on:

- What is its 'power' to compel others to become engaged and active
- Who leads it and what level/grade of Departmental representation is required
- Who set and managed the agenda
- Who decides the priorities?
- Is it thematic and therefore engages Departments and public body representatives as appropriate for the theme(s) or is it wider

ABC Community Planning Presentation

Local Government Act 2014 created the conditions to establish Community Planning Partners once the new (post 2015 RPA) 11 councils were established agreed in 2015.

4 sub committees are in place as follows:

- Promoting good health and wellbeing
- Anti-poverty
- Shared community, leadership and engagement
- Place

Place Planning has focused on developing and agreeing Place Plans for the tier 1,2&3 settlements across the Council area. The recently published and adopted Place Plan for Dromore was presented to the Working Group members (in hard copy).

Statement of Progress Report for the Community Planning Partnership is published every two years.

ABC is the only Community Planning Partnership with a Place Board.

It was noted that the Place Plan have no agreed budgets at present time. They prepared in advanced to be ready to apply for funding opportunities (capital or revenue) when it arises. It was noted that each Place Plan has an Engagement and Stakeholder Engagement section at the end of the Place Plan. This allows local government and other community planning stakeholders and local community organisations to have this information to support applications for support (capital or revenue).

Participatory budgeting has been piloted as part of the roll out of the Dromore Place Plan. Groups can apply for up to £1000. Group take a stall at a community event and 'pitch' their project. Funding is awarded pro rata to the level of support(votes) they attract.

Suggested that participatory planning process should be used or decision making on policy more so than small awards of financial investment.

The ABC Community Planning Partnership used the Place Board for 'deep dives' e.g.

- Green economy
- Economy
- Heritage

Discussion focused on the feeling that Community Planning approaches and buy in/involvement by stakeholders vary across the 11 local authorities. On that basis that Community Planning Partnerships provide community based structures discussion focused on how any new rural policy and Championing Model might engage with them.

Item 4: Key Broad Outcomes and Elements of a Rural Champions Model

DAERA provided an overview of the previous Rural Champion proposal and its six roles. Working Group Members were asked to prioritise or challenge the roles

Annex C contains the outputs of the Working Groups assessment of the importance and relevance of the six roles.

The discussion closed on addressing what the Working Group needs to focus on to develop policy proposals for the Rural Champion role. Key points to help direct Meeting 3 of the Working Group include:

- Need to fully understand why previous cross departmental models/Committees did not fully achieve their potential

- Need to define what the model(or options for it) might look like; is it an external Commissioners Office; people in Departments or specific DAERA Officers or any other option which might meet the Rural Future aim and objective
- Need to identify if it has a wide (all of rural perspective) or thematic focus
- Needs to address its agenda and who sets it
- Needs to address who leads and what 'power' it must compel others to engage and at what level(say Grade 3)

Closing Remarks:

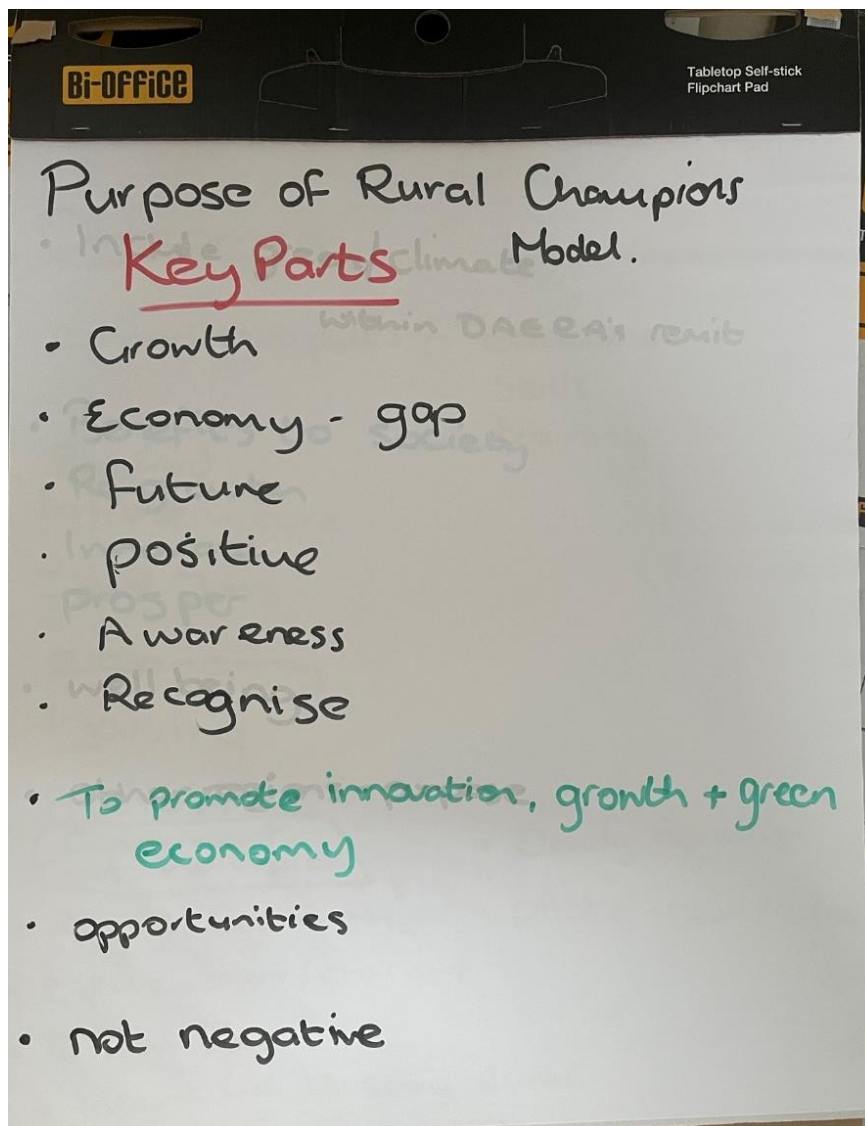
The Co-Chair thanked members for their contributions and confirmed that the next meeting of the Championing Rural Communities Working Group would be on 21st July 2025 in Greenmount College.

Annex A – Record of Attendance

Name	Organisation /Department/Title	Response	Attendance
<u>Alison Monteith</u>	SIB Facilitator	Accepted	✓
<u>John O’Neill</u>	SIB Facilitator	Accepted	✓
<u>John White</u>	DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Louise Coyle</u>	NIRWN	Accepted	✓
<u>Siobhan O’Neill</u>	Mental Health Champion	Deputy - Neil Goodwin	Apologies From Neil Goodwin
<u>Cormac Doherty</u>	DAERA Rural Needs	Declined	Apologies from Cormac Doherty
<u>Kiera Lloyd</u>	Dfi	Deputy- Gavin Irwin	✓
<u>John Napier</u>	DOJ	Accepted	✓
<u>Siobhan Broderick</u>	DOH	Deputy – Gary Maxwell	✓
<u>Rosemary McKee</u>	DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Claire Jack</u>	AFBI	Accepted	✓
<u>Nicholas McCrickard</u>	RCN	Deputy Breige Conway	✓

<u>Samantha Gallagher</u>	RCN	Declined	Apologies from Samantha Gallagher
<u>Sally Shortall</u>	Newcastle University	Accepted	✓
<u>Margaret Bell</u>	LibrariesNI	Accepted	✓
<u>Caoimhe Treanor</u>	DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Elaine Gillespie</u>	SOLACE - Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council. Head of Department: Community Planning, Policy & Research	Deputy - Lissa O'Malley	✓
<u>Maria Bradley</u>	SRPB – DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Nigel Quinn</u>	SRPB – DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Shane O'Connor</u>	SRPB - DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Rosemary Mackey</u>	SRPB - DAERA	Accepted	✓
<u>Bronagh Mullan</u>	SRPB - DAERA	Accepted	✓

Annex B – Scope & Purpose of Rural Champion's Model



Group 1

What has worked well

DAERA - Champion lead?

Helicopter view

how to build collaboration?
Watchdog - not DAERA Role
- not community group roles

Pressure on C&US re Rural Policy.

↳ unsure that DAERA should have
this role - mechanisms need to be in
place

Statistician positive

↳ extended across depts

Evolving PURPOSE — concise & !.
✓ clear
— clarity.

○ Evidence & Information.
— Supporting Action.

○ Wider than Public Sector.

○ Asset Focus
— Positives & Opportunities

○ Recognise Rural Diversity.

○ Benefit to All society.

○ Innovation

Growth inc. Green Growth
Wellbeing.

SCOPE

○ Focus (Priority) Themes (annually).
+ Review → Stakeholders.

○ Wider than central govt.
— all Rural interests

Bi-Office

Tabletop Self-stick
Flipchart Pad

PURPOSE + SCOPE R.C.

MODELS HD OUTCOMES

~~DEPT~~

DISCUSSION

- UNDERSTANDING RURAL
- DATA + EVIDENCE - POLICY - OUTCOMES
- RURAL NEEDS ACT
- POLITICAL ARENA - RISKS + CHALLENGES
- GOVERNANCE / ADVOCACY
- DIVERSITY / INCLUSION
- THEMATIC APPROACH - BASED ON RESEARCH
- ACTUAL ISSUES ON THE GROUND
- CHAMPION ROLE PARTNERSHIPS
- DIFFICULTIES FACED BY OTHER JURISDICTIONS

• Economy - jobs

• Company

Key points?

- Include green/climate

within DAERA's remit

Timed outputs

- Benefits to society

Required Infrastructure

- Re-growth
- Innovate
- Prosper

Skills training

- well being

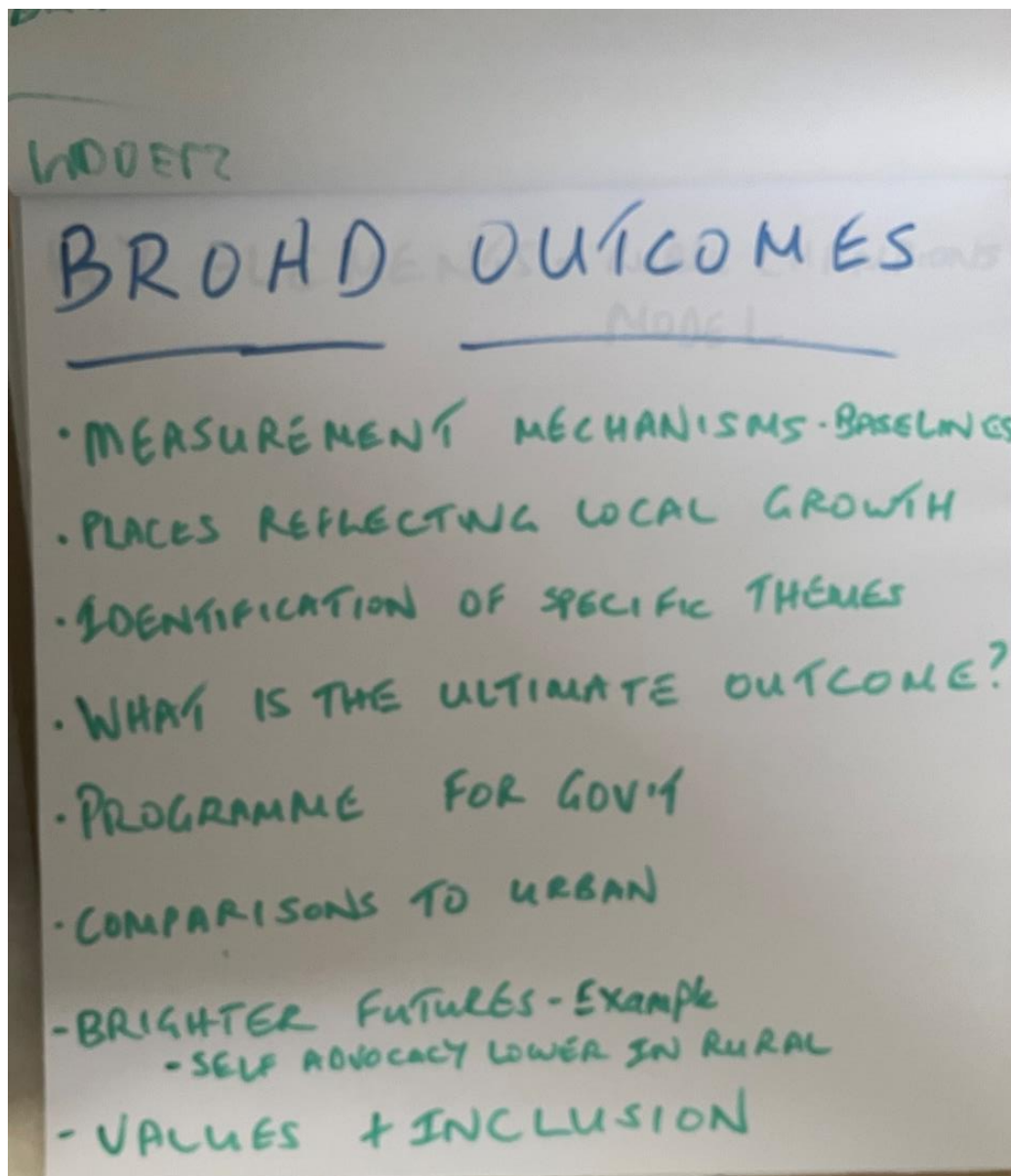
economy housing

- Other regions - purpose

Government Cost has plan

- Rural economy
- Education/training
- Transport
- Incentives to stay rural
- Elderly Population
- pilots - good practice

Annex C - Broad Outcomes and Elements of a Rural Champions Model



• justified for 2015/16

MINIMUM DUESHIG IGMIF

• increase discov / growth

Outcomes

Timed outputs. - ^{is} education
Skills
training

Required

Infrastructure

Good Jobs

economy

housing

Action Plan

Government
Cost plan

- Rural economy
- Education / training
- Transport
- Incentive to stay rural.
- Elderly Population
- pilots - good practice

DUEKT - 1509

GROUP 2

Rural Needs Act

- brought Rural to table
- increased visibility / awareness
- new JR positive

Resource Commitment - TRPSI

TRPSI - Collaboration; allowed timeliness.

Rural done well in Agric budget

Dial a Lift a positive.

OTHER IDEAS

promotion - ^{gathering +} sharing good practice examples

- DRIVING POSITIVE INITIATIVES AND HAVE • •
CLEAR MONITORING TOOLS + measurement

REVIEWER ROLE - LIKE AUTISM •

listener - ethos ok but not the title ⇒ collaborator

Delivery mode - pilot projects

Collaborator / Build consensus / partnership

ROLES

1. Advocate
 2. Advisor
 3. Initiator ^{OR COLLABORATOR?}
 4. Exemplar
 5. WATCHDOG ^{EXTERNAL / INDEPENDENT REVIEWER}
 6. LISTENER
- INFORMING / SIGNPOSTING.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

MONITORING ^{+ REPORTING} TOOLS
+ MEASUREMENT (more difficult)

DAERA Championing Rural Communities

Working Group Meeting 3

21 July 2025

Greenmount College - Conference Hall

Introduction

This note has been prepared by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) as an independent record of the Championing Rural Communities Working Group meeting held on 21 July 2025 as part of the process leading to the development of a new rural policy framework for Northern Ireland.

Attendance

The participants in Working Group Meeting 3 are Appended at Annex A

Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Kiera Lloyd (DfI)

John Napier (DoJ)

Rosemary McKee (DAERA)

Neil Goodwin (Mental Health Champion)

Siobhan Broderick (DoH) Gary Maxwell Deputising

Elaine Gillespie (SOLACE)

1. Introduction & Welcome – Championing Rural Working Group Co-Chairs

A welcome was extended to the working group.

The housekeeping arrangements were outlined, including:

- No scheduled fire drills
- WIFI access
- Location of bathrooms
- Use of Fulton room 2 for private calls
- Photography may take place promoting the work of DAERA
- Close around 3.45pm

2. Agreement of SIB record of meetings 1 & 2 – SIB Facilitator

The records of the previous working group meetings [1&2] were reviewed and agreed as an accurate reflection of proceedings.

3. Introduction, objectives & updates – DAERA Co-Chair & SIB Facilitator

The purpose of working group meeting 3 was established and the objectives for the meeting were presented, including:

- Review of scope, purpose and draft policy proposals [9 developed to date]
- Context of the 3 objectives for Rural Policy and the working group linkage of scope, purpose and policy proposals to these objectives
- Presentation from Sally Shortall – “Research evidence in other jurisdictions”
- Consideration of how proposals could be measured and the development of indicators/impacts of the Rural Champion Model

Review status of other working groups – DAERA Co-Chair

[i] Oversight Group

- The third meeting of the Oversight Group took place on 4th July 2025. This group is due to meet again on 26th September 2025
- The group has presented a significant recognition of the input and work from stakeholders and the support from policy teams. There has also been recognition of the extent of the collaboration
- There are many synergies across the work of the working groups
- Recognition that the Rural Needs Act brings ‘rural’ to the fore
- Reestablishing links with academia regarding rural evidence and research
- Recognition of the function and role of Rural Champions in implementation of rural policy, delivery and achievement of outputs/outcomes
- The importance of succession planning in retention of rural knowledge
- The need for positive language regarding the work towards developing rural policy – this work presents the potential for ‘good news’ stories

The Co-Chair presented a short outline of the likely consultation plan and timeline:

- Working group reports to complete by end September
- Consultation will follow and likely towards the last quarter of 2025

[ii] Other Working Groups

Supporting Rural Communities:

- Strategic rural funding model has been amended to reflect rural supports beyond funding/finance
- Agreed 7 principles
- Community planning model presents differences across 11 local authorities

Understanding Rural Communities:

- In the process of drafting the working group report [having met 5 times]
- Interested in receipt of feedback from other working groups
- Relevance of 'data' key to the way forward
- Require a baseline audit to establish and measure outcomes
- Lack of scrutiny regarding RNIAs

Discussion points – facilitated by John O'Neill SIB

- What will the baseline audit measure? Objectives for the audit are important to establish in the context of establishing 'what good looks like'
- As part of PfG monitoring there will be an urban and rural split of data
- Measuring tools should form part of the discussion
- NISRA already produces a 'rural' report - there is a need to work with NISRA to discuss areas for development and additional rural depth and breadth of data. This will help establish the evidence base to underpin rural typologies
- Citizen science information is critical in developing the qualitative data which is often more informative and up to date

4. Research evidence in other jurisdictions – Sally Shortall, Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University

Republic of Ireland:

- Higher education group meet twice per year
- Research is commissioned annually
- There is clear engagement with OECD to inform rural policy
- Academics pitch research proposals for funding
- DRCD have commissioned ESRI to produce rural baseline reports – this work includes involvement of CSO
- There is a recognised 6-way split of data for rural
- Challenge remains regarding the definition of rural which is often impacted by political geographies

Ireland: 6-way split of rural data

- 1. Cities:** Major urban centres.

2. Satellite urban towns: Smaller urban areas that are closely linked to, and often dependent on, a larger city.

3. Independent urban towns: Urban areas that are not directly linked to a major city, with their own distinct economic and social characteristics.

4. Rural areas with high urban influence: Areas close to cities or large towns, experiencing significant interaction with the urban centre.

5. Rural areas with moderate urban influence: Areas less directly influenced by urban centres than the previous category, but still with some degree of interaction.

6. Highly rural/remote areas: Areas with the least urban influence, often characterized by sparse population and limited access to services.

England:

- Existence of Social Science Research group
- Existence of Science Advisory Council¹ made up entirely of environmental scientists
- Considering development of Rural Research Centre
- Commissioning research with a rural focus
- Academics pitch research proposals for funding
- Some striking demographic evidence e.g. more expensive to buy a house in the rural suburbs of London than in city centre – this is impacting the rural demography. This type of data underpins the need to understand the full range of rural typologies and issues such as demographic imbalances, provision of services, accessibility. Evidence of strong typologies is seen in lobbying of government policy e.g. the ‘anti masts’ lobby

Wales:

- Funding of the Wales Rural Observatory²
- Evidence of University partnerships with both Cardiff and Aberystwyth Universities
- Retention of independence
- Move to area-based development in Welsh Strategic Plan – this has supported a significant commitment to rural

Scotland:

- Funding of SEFARI³
- Existence of Science Advisory Council⁴
- The Scottish government directly commissions research
- Academics pitch research proposals for funding
- Evidence that research informs policy development

Discussion points – facilitated by John O’Neill SIB

- Clear evidence that research is being commissioned specific to informing rural and rural policy
- Information is available in multiple formats including reports, policy briefs and PowerPoint presentations
- Attending conferences is informative and useful
- Existence of rapid response from contracted providers
- Lack of NI evidence base – difficult to ‘Champion’ as baseline is unknown
- Need to establish priorities for rural NI and evidence is central to establishing priorities
- Should consider assessment of how current research is being used to inform rural
- Imperative that research is used to inform policy i.e. evidence-based policy
- Importance of incentives to encourage female entrepreneurs and innovators

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/science-advisory-council>

² <https://www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk/>

³ <https://sefari.scot>

⁴ <https://scottishscience.org.uk/>

- In terms of baselining gender is important
- Recognition of key role of females in progressive agriculture processes and ecology
- NI farms require alternative income sources
- Must know and understand the evidence base to identify the needs to be championed
- Rapid evidence response interesting/valuable
- Value of developing and using qualitative data
- Republic of Ireland has 179 priorities within Our Rural Future⁵
- Review of OECD identified the need for qualitative data and examples
- Significant evaluation and research data exists in NI – how best to access and use this information
- Existence of high-level scientific network within DAERA
- Must define the specifics of the Rural Champion Model – DAERA to add metrics at the Working Group reporting stage
- 6-way split of rural data in ROI was further discussed including urbanization, proximity, settlement type, relative access, specific policy context
- Good relationships between government departments helpful
- If need can be defined, where can investment make a real difference – prioritization important to maximise impacts/returns

Next steps for the meeting:

The Co-Chair further defined the role of the Working Group and reiterated the overarching objectives of the Working Group

1. To develop proposals for a new Rural Champions Model
2. To develop proposals to improve the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act [2016]
3. To develop proposals for improving the capacity of relevant stakeholder organisations to champion rural at policy and delivery levels

5. Facilitated discussion on draft policy proposals for a Rural Champions Model

Introduction – DAERA Co-Chair

- ‘Evidence’ and ‘research’ being addressed by another working group
- Purpose and scope of the Working Group requires to be addressed in the context of developing a ‘Rural Champion Model’

Key aims:

⁵<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-rural-and-community-development-and-the-gaeltacht/publications/our-rural-future-rural-development-policy-2021-2025/>

- Addressing the rural policy perspective
- How to improve ‘scope’ of rural research/statistics/evidence and their use across government
- Approaches to encourage, support, innovate and collaborate
- Maximise opportunities for local growth

Workshops – Facilitated by SIB

The purpose of the workshops was further presented by the SIB Facilitator to address

Workshop 1: Scope & purpose of the Rural Champions Model

Workshop 2: Review of policy proposals

Both workshops to more widely consider:

- Development of the proposals to support Rural Champions Model
- Effectiveness of Rural Needs Act [defined as proposal 9]
- Capacity and capability of relevant stakeholder organisations at policy and delivery levels
- Review of the 9 [potential] policy proposals that have been initially worked up – ability to amend and add to these of necessary

Workshop 1 – Scope & purpose

See Annex B – Flip charts

Workshop feedback facilitated by John O’Neill SIB

Scope:

- Diversity of rural voices
- Challenges of overlap between scope and purpose
- Must reflect the Rural Champions Model
- Must provide an evidence-based approach

Purpose:

- Requirement for connection between rural policy makers
- Rural needs require to be clearly defined
- Significance of the breadth of focus
- Rural issues stem from regional imbalance and a lack of equity of outcomes
- Need to influence policy makers
- Actions must include connecting, influencing, educating and informing

Discussion point facilitated by John O'Neill SIB

- Must be wider than NICS
- Should have a collaboration and learning focus
- Have national, regional and local focus
- Present a reflection of best practice
- DAERA has signed up to Rural Futures
- Focus on 'North, South, East, West' dimension
- Participation on networks is of importance
- 2 points of scope discussed [1] direct policy [2] indirect wider influence
- Cross border dimension
- Divergence following EU exit
- Appetite in RoI to provide resources for rural collaboration cross border
- Shared practice NI/RoI

Agreed [subject to further wording updates agreed by the Working Group]

Scope

Positioning NI as an outward facing region that shares best practice, collaborates with all relevant stakeholders and advances evidence-based responses to the opportunities and challenges facing diverse rural communities

Purpose

The purpose of the rural champions model is to connect policy and decision makers to rural communities and evidence which influence strategic policy to promote regional equity and to maximise the contribution of rural to wider society

It was further agreed the following wording could be used to support the definition of meeting rural needs:

To advance a robust and vibrant NI that is economically sustainable, demographically diverse, regionally balanced and inclusive – fostering communities with a strong sense of well being

Workshop 2 – Policy Proposals

The SIB Facilitator presented that policy proposal 9 would be the subject of consideration at the workshop scheduled for 22 July 2025.

The Facilitator further presented that the following [3] proposals were most relevant to the work of other Working Groups and as such it had been previously viewed that these would be transferred to the most relevant Working Groups.

Following discussion, it was agreed this was appropriate.

Policy proposal 2: Establishment of a Rural Expert Group
Transfer to: Understanding Rural Communities Working Group
<p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to involve engagement with a wide range of evidence providers • DAERA takes a very good account of rural, but this requires extension to a much wider range of stakeholders • It was confirmed by DAERA that a wide range of practitioners are engaged in all the Working Groups • It was agreed that policy proposals moving to other Working Groups should be followed up • Rapid evidence response should be included in the proposal • Importance of inclusion of rural expert academia to support identification and informing the evidence of needs • Capacity of the expert group should be a resource for DAERAs use

Policy proposal 5: Invite OECD to undertake a review of rural policy in NI
Transfer to: Understanding Rural Communities Working Group
<p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The timing of the review requires to be determined • There should be ongoing reviews every [say] 5 years • Review should be collaborative with DAERA • Some discussion regarding who would commission the review and if it might involve a UK government request • OECD will be invited to review the entire policy

Policy proposal 8: Champion innovation in rural policy and delivery through a collaborative model
Transfer to: Supporting Rural Communities Working Group
<p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some elements of the proposal were identified as ambitious [point 42 of the draft proposals] • Some discussion regarding why this proposal is being moved if focused on 'Championing' • The Supporting Rural Needs EG is considering funding streams • Need for funders continue to 'Champion' rural outside of financial commitment • TRPSI framework was a lever for financial support • Suggestion to take 'Champion' out of the name • DAERA confirmed Working Groups have been specifically set up to separate the work streams

It was agreed to transfer these 3 policy proposals.

The remaining 5 policy proposals were then considered, as follows.

<p>Policy proposal 4: Bid to Host the European Parliament</p> <p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration given on how to measure outcomes • Establishment of the objectives and what the aims for achievement are • Linkage of outcomes and aims to overall objectives for rural • Important in the context of enabling and empowering new stakeholders • Some discussion regarding pricing for participation and the impact this might have • Creation of conversation space – needs to be more than a series of presentations • Could support a North/South dimension • North/South dimension could drive new projects with rural focus • Matching rural communities NI/RoI • Need to build indicators and outcomes and focus on helping improve people’s lives • Enabling of new stakeholder groups • Focus on targets groups e.g. LGBTQ+, disability, refugees, migrants • Potential to impact upon long-term tangible benefits • Consider ‘Outcome Based Accountability’ approach: [1] How much did we do [2] How well did we do it [3] Are people better off • Informing best practice • Networking opportunity important • Timing of the event is important • Could also consider other rural international events e.g. OECD Rural Development Conference • DAERA confirmed when Working Group report is being developed it will include indicators/outputs/outcomes
<p>Policy proposal 6: Hosting of a rural conference</p> <p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential opportunity to consider partnering with Teagasc • Cross border focus • Include the word ‘networking’ in paragraph 35 • A recurring event would be best becoming a core part of the championing function – potentially, annually • The event could be an important capacity builder for DAERA • Consider a ‘rural week’ of programmes and event e.g. like ‘enterprise week’ • Ability of local groups to host events will be important • Must mean something to rural people and be pitched accordingly • Bring out the qualitative and lived experience • Succession planning requires inclusion • Potential link to youth parliament with local authority involvement • Rural development graduates and link to academia • Importance of role of RCNs in delivery
<p>Policy proposal 7: Introduction of rural awards</p> <p><u>Discussion:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very positive idea • Creation of feel-good factor

- Elevation and visibility of good practice
- Establish clear priorities
- Potentially combine with conference
- Helps to keep rural on the 'agenda'
- Nominations and assessment independently of DAERA
- Learning by looking at other jurisdictions
- Breadth of themes to be maximised
- Significant amount of planning required
- Good news story
- 'Rural Champion Awards'

Policy proposal 3: Establishment of a rural engagement network

Discussion:

- Discussion on new versus existing expansion of Forum for Rural Organisations
- Important to get terms of reference for the group
- Scotland have commissioned a review of the existing group to inform new structures
- The ToR of the Forum for Rural Organisations is being reviewed
- Learning from previous iterations of rural networks
- The network could be developed and be significantly broad
- RSNs have significant membership including community groups – if extending further the network could be large enough to present some administrative challenges
- Potential for online/AI use to manage
- Engagement with wider NICS would be helpful
- Potential for thematic focus
- Needs to be linked to evidence
- Potential to help address capacity
- Consultation could include intent on expansion of network
- Help to connect rural with local government
- DAERA missing from community planning partnership – could rural engagement network take part in community planning – this linkage is important
- Local government is both a policy maker and advocate for rural communities
- Connection of networks to local government is important
- The community plan is linked to PfG – important to get rural recognised at these levels
- Working together works!
- Must get championing of rural linked with community planning

Agreed:

- Expansion of existing Forum for Rural Organisations
- Wider membership to increase the rural voice
- Create 2-way linkage with public authorities

Policy proposal 1: Appointment of a NICS rural champion

Discussion:

- Due to time constraints discussion was moved to workshop on 22nd July 2025

6. Closing Remarks – Co-Chairs of the Championing Rural Working Group

The Co-Chair closed the workshop with thanks to all participants for their ongoing commitment.

He presented a short summary of the key tasks for the workshop on 22nd July 2025 which is being held in the Seamus Heaney Centre.

Next steps include:

- Development of the Working Group report
- Inclusion of indicators in the report
- Agreement and reporting of report content [end of August]

The Co-Chair also extended her thanks to the group for the ongoing commitment and efforts in developing the Rural Champions Model.

CLOSE

Annex A: Attendance

Meeting: Championing Rural Communities Working Group – Meeting 3

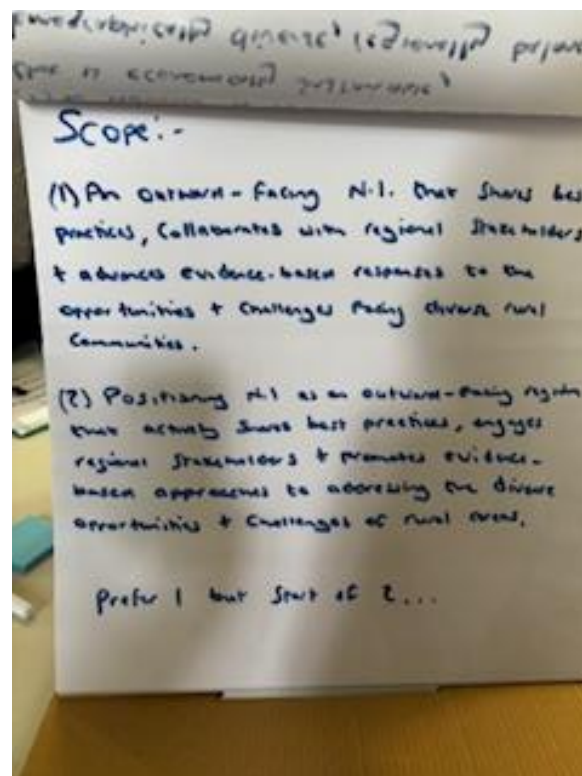
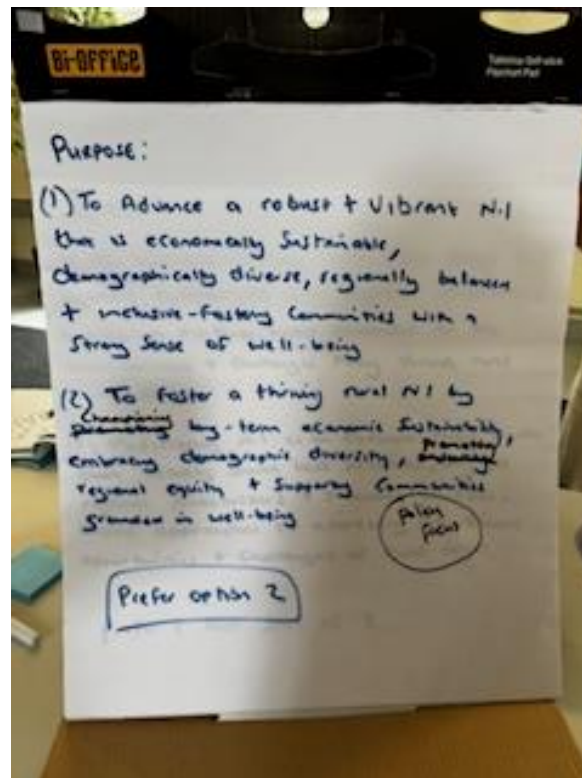
Date/Time: 21 July 2025 at 10am – 4pm

Minutes: David Bradshaw (Strategic Investment Board)

Louise Coyle	NIRWN
John White	DAERA
Maria Bradley	DAERA – SRPB
Nigel Quinn	DAERA – SRPB
Cormac Doherty	DAERA – Rural Needs
Shane O’Connor	DAERA - SRPB
Claire Jack	AFBI
Jill Heron	DoJ
Siobhan Broderick	DoH
Nicholas McCrickard	RSN
Samantha Gallagher	RCN
Sally Shortall	NU
Margaret Bell	Libraries NI
Caoimhe Treanor	DAERA – Food Strategy
Gary Maxwell	DoH

Annex B: Flip charts

The Purpose of the Rural
Champions Model is to be
a dynamic + ~~flexible~~ inclusive
framework aimed at connecting
all ^{+ decision} policy makers to rural
communities ^{and} ~~to~~ influence
policy to meet rural needs
and to maximise the
contribution of rural to
wider society.



DAERA Championing Rural Communities

Working Group Meeting 4

22 July 2025

Seamus Heaney Centre, Bellaghy

Introduction

This note has been prepared by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) as an independent record of the Championing Rural Communities Working Group meeting held on 22 July 2025 as part of the process leading to the development of a new rural policy framework for Northern Ireland.

Attendance

The participants in Working Group Meeting 4 are appended at Annex A

Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Kiera Lloyd (DfI)

Rosemary Mckee (DAERA)

John Napier (DoJ) Jill Heron Deputising

7. Introduction & Welcome – Championing Rural Co-Chairs

A welcome was extended to the working group.

The Co-Chairs extended thanks to the group for attendance at both workshops on 21st & 22nd July 2025.

The housekeeping arrangements were outlined, including:

- No scheduled fire drills
- WIFI access
- Location of bathrooms
- Photography may take place promoting the work of DAERA
- Close around 3.45pm

John White presented a summary of the agenda for the day ahead:

1. Recap of progress from 21st July 2025 workshop [yesterday] – SIB Facilitator
2. Consideration of the last two policy proposals [1 & 9]
3. Consideration of how policy proposals meet the overarching objectives of the Working Group

DAERA confirmed that policy proposals will be sent out in written form to other departments who have been unable to attend.

8. Summary review of progress from 21st July 2025 – SIB Facilitator

The SIB Facilitator presented:

- A summary review of progress made on scope and purpose
- A summary review of progress made on policy proposals
- An introduction to policy proposals 1 & 9
- Presentations from Sally Shortall – NU & Cormac Doherty– DAERA: Rural Needs Act [2016]

Discussion: Policy proposal 3: Establishment of a Rural Engagement Network

- DAERA has an engagement forum with several rural stakeholders
- The proposal should extend connections with other departments and local authorities
- This policy proposal is significantly wide and must link in some way to policy makers
- Importance of broadening the membership of the Forum for Rural Organisations in line with good practice in other jurisdictions
- Concerns regarding the capacity for rural organisations to engage
- Challenges of having the community and voluntary sector voice heard
- The Forum for Rural Organisations is a good place to share information
- More thought needed on separation of inter-departmental group and community involvement

- Community and voluntary sector are engaging with public authorities across multiple themes – capacity is an ongoing challenge
- Consideration of ‘tiers’ of networking – the network is vitally important
- Loss of expertise in the rural sector – need to sell the positives and invest in bringing new people forward
- NICS are trying to align better with existing structures – not new structures
- Review of what we currently have before anything new is created
- Rural Needs network meets twice a year
- Wider departmental contact takes place via feedback
- Implications of resourcing an important consideration
- Must use digital technology to reduce impacts on already stretched capacity
- Within NICS, Policy Champions Network already exists led by David Hughes
- NICS are already covering multiple stakeholder groups
- Not all departments have internal experts and networking must be practical
- Need for clear focus and ToR – must be realistic in terms of priorities
- Rural Needs Act addressed by Equality teams in NICS
- Departments need guided on the Rural Needs Act
- Should discuss how to link with community planning partnerships
- Example of good practice: innovations networks discussed
- Rural Co-Ordinator’s role has dual role of equality and rural
- Need to discuss further rural needs and its evidence base
- The Forum for Rural Organisations is an effective organisation that engages the rural sector and DAERA. The organisation includes: 2 RCN’s, NIRWN, Rural Action & Rural Support and Community Transport
- Need to widen the rural voice

Agreed for Policy Proposal 3

- Build on existing Forum for Rural Organisations [not new structure]
- Broaden membership to increase the rural voice [potential to map voices not represented]
- Develop clarity around agenda and purpose
- Create a 2-way engagement so the public sector can engage with the Forum
- Further consideration of resources and capacity
- Explore linkage with community planning processes
- Provide for early-stage engagement on rural with NICS

9. Policy proposals – facilitated by John O’Neill SIB

The SIB Facilitator introduced discussion regarding Policy Proposal 1: Appointment of NICS Rural Champion and the creation of an inter-departmental group

Discussion: Policy Proposal 1

- Inter-departmental expectation
- Rural Champion appointment will be within DAERA
- Inter-departmental engagement within existing structures [where possible] e.g. Policy Champions Network
- Maintain and review processes including an initial short-term review of progress and effectiveness
- OFMDFM setting up a GFI civic forum

Discussion identified the need for consideration of a new Policy Proposal 10 to address resourcing an outward looking commitment to rural.

Discussion: Proposed Policy Proposal 10

- Making available resources
- Commitment from departments
- Funding for departmental officials to attend outward looking events
- Hosting internally
- Cross border opportunities
- Capacity building to facilitate growth of rural

Agreed: Policy Proposal 10 wording

DAERA to support knowledge exchange through participation on national and international networks and to explore hosting events in NI

Discussion identified the need for consideration of a new Policy Proposal 11 to support resourcing the championing function – both human resources and financial resources

Discussion: Proposed Policy Proposal 11

- Academically rural is looked at from an environmental perspective. The shift in rural policy also drives where funding goes
- DfC has responsibility for funding of the community and voluntary sector
- Capacity issue around wider groups that have not had rural focus e.g. LGBTQ+
- DAERA delivery rural needs training
- DAERA PhD programme under utilised
- In the RoI, DRCD have invested in rural review
- How we look at rural has changed e.g. Just Transitions Climate Change
- Whilst infrastructure and jobs are dominated in cities, in the RoI the rural population is growing
- Proposal should consider a programme for rural champions based on education, training & succession planning
- Should have a dual impact on policy and delivery
- Focus on short, medium and long-term

- Influence of the private sector should also be considered
- The spirit of the Rural Needs Act [2016] in the function of the rural champions
- Need to define what the rural need is

Agreed: Policy Proposal 11 wording

To invest in and develop the capacity and capability to effectively champion on behalf of rural Northern Ireland

10. Presentations – Sally Shortall NU & Cormac Doherty DAERA – Rural Needs Act 2016

Discussion: Rural Needs Act [2016]

- Clear policy objectives that DAERA can control
- Policies must be actionable
- Must be resources or change will be challenging
- Transparency necessary
- Rural communities must have visibility
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Expectations of rural proofing too high
- Rural champions must be resourced
- Useful to define what has been achieved because of the Rural Needs Act
- What did the Judicial Review achieve – what has changed
- RNIA process is recommended by DAERA
- Who is reading the RNIAs and how can this body of evidence be shared
- There is work underway to attempt to digitalise the RNIA process
- The RNIA process is not used to reverse decisions based on financial/feasibility
- Good practice e.g. Library service out of hours and mobile services and farm family health checks funded via TRPSI

11. Policy Proposal 9 – Undertake a Review of the Rural Needs Act [2016]

DAERA confirmed that the Minister has committed to undertake a review of the Rural Needs Act [2016].

Agreed: Amendment of the wording of the proposal

To improve the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act

Discussion:

- Rural now on the agenda

- Good that rural is on the agenda but must avoid 'tick box' process
- The Act confirms recognition that rural should be considered
- The Act should be subject to monitoring and evaluation
- Produce evidence to underpin gaps in policy provision
- Establish clear objectives
- Reporting linkage with other Working Group actions
- Promoting and communicating
- RNIA redesign towards self-assessment/accountability
- How the 'no impact' statement is scrutinized
- Provision of training/mandatory training
- Online provision
- Make it part of policy
- Rural Needs Co-Ordinators could scrutinize the process
- Learning from Climate Change team – guidance from DAERA
- Engage with Audit Office and DoF Innovation Branch
- RNIA ensures that public authorities give due regard to the Rural Needs Act
- DAERA Co-Ordination role could provide additional scrutiny
- RNIAs can be a small part of a wider role
- Lack of awareness on the need to complete RNIAs
- Reliance on DAERA to deliver on rural
- RNIA in advance of policy can be difficult
- Should always be published by public authorities
- More support for public authorities
- Lack of evidence/baseline
- Could be part of a wider remit of Forum
- Share and showcase good practice
- Monitoring, evaluation, aftercare
- Provide clear link to development of rural policy

12. Summary review – SIB Facilitator

The SIB Facilitator provided a summary review of the work completed, include:

- Scope and purpose
- Policy proposals
- Presentation inputs from Sally and Cormac

He reiterated the importance of the alignment of work done with the overall rural policy commitments.

13. Closing Comments – Championing Rural Co-Chairs

Confirmed that:

- DAERA will now compile the initial Working Group report
- The report will be circulated to the Working Group
- The Working Group will reconvene to review the report on 27th August 2025 [venue to be confirmed]
- The report will feed into the Oversight Group which reconvenes on 26th September 2025

The Co-Chairs thanked the group and encouraged feedback on the co-design process.

CLOSE

Annex A: Attendance

Meeting: Championing Rural Communities Working Group – Meeting 3

Date/Time: 22 July 2025 at 10am – 4pm

Minutes: David Bradshaw (Strategic Investment Board)

Louise Coyle	NIRWN
John White	DAERA
Maria Bradley	DAERA – SRPB
Nigel Quinn	DAERA – SRPB
Cormac Doherty	DAERA – Rural Needs
Shane O’Connor	DAERA - SRPB
Claire Jack	AFBI
Jill Heron	DoJ
Siobhan Broderick	DoH
Nicholas McCrickard	RSN
Samantha Gallagher	RCN
Sally Shortall	NU
Margaret Bell	Libraries NI
Caoimhe Treanor	DAERA – Food Strategy
John O’Neill	SIB
Elaine Gillespie	SOLACE