



Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041

Summary of Consultation Responses



Understanding, championing and supporting rural Northern Ireland



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**
www.daera-ni.gov.uk

An Roinn
**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'
**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**



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Contents

1. Executive Summary	4
2. Background and Policy Context	5
3. Consultation	6
4. Responses from Consultation Events	9
5. Summary of Consultation Responses	18
Consultation Approach	18
Overview of Feedback	18
Policy Proposals	29
Proposal 1: Putting Rural Voices at the Heart of Government	29
Proposal 2: Local Partnerships for Local Impact	34
Proposal 3: Understanding Rural	40
Proposal 4: Strengthening Rural Communities at Local and Regional Level	49
Proposal 5: Reviewing the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016	52
Policy Priorities	58
6. What Next?	63
7. Annexes	64
Annex A: List of Public Consultation Engagement Events	64
Annex B: List of Organisational Respondents	65
Annex C: Breakdown of Responses Across Individuals and Organisations	67
Annex D: Levels of Support Across all Respondents	69
Annex E: Levels of Support Among Individual Respondents	71
Annex F: Levels of Support Among Organisational Respondents	73



Kells Village,
County Antrim

1. Executive Summary

Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041¹ sets out the long term vision for a thriving, sustainable and inclusive rural Northern Ireland.

In developing this new rural policy, DAERA led a co-design process which included participants from Northern Ireland government departments, local councils, public bodies, rural voluntary and community groups, and academics. This collaborative approach gathered views from across society, including people with lived experience and helped shape the draft long-term policy, which focuses on understanding, championing and supporting rural communities.

DAERA launched a public consultation on **Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041** on 9 March 2026. The consultation ran for 12 weeks, closing on 1 June 2026. A total of 136 responses were received. This consultation included an online questionnaire, a series of public engagement events held across Northern Ireland, and a number of online events. This report presents a summary of the key findings.

The report summarises responses to the online questionnaire, along with the views gathered during consultation events. While it provides an overview of the feedback, it does not include every comment received.

The Department will use the valuable feedback received through the consultation process, to update the rural policy proposals. The feedback and suggestions received will also help inform the development of delivery-focused action plans. The final policy will be subject to Ministerial and Northern Ireland Executive agreement.

DAERA is grateful to co-design partners and respondents for the time taken to reflect on the questions and welcomes the contributions made.

¹ [Public Consultation on Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041](#) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



Castlerock, County Derry ~ Londonderry

2. Background and Policy Context

Rural communities are diverse, encompassing small towns, villages, hamlets, farming communities and the open countryside, each with distinct characteristics, needs and opportunities. Many of the challenges facing rural areas cut across different Northern Ireland government departments' responsibilities, highlighting the importance of collaboration and coordinated working across government.

The draft policy has been developed in the context of significant change affecting rural areas. Following the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), the European Commission-approved Rural Development Programme ceased to operate in Northern Ireland. This provides an opportunity to reflect on how rural policy is taken forward and the role DAERA can play in supporting a more strategic, cross-government approach to rural issues.

Wider changes, including new climate change legislation, the transition to Net Zero, the most recent Programme for Government, tighter public finances, and changes in patterns of work and connectivity, have also shaped the rural policy landscape.

The draft policy builds on learning from previous approaches, including the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (TRPSI) 2016, and the Rural Policy Framework 2022. The policy is underpinned by the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which requires public authorities to consider rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and delivering public services.

Having a clear, long-term rural policy is important to ensure that rural communities are understood, supported and represented in decision-making. By bringing government and rural communities together, **Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041** seeks to ensure that rural voices are heard, and that rural needs and opportunities are taken into account. This approach is intended to support decision-making that better reflects how people live and work in rural Northern Ireland, both now and in the future.



Slieve Gullion Forest Park,
County Armagh

3. Consultation

Consultation Process and Methodology

The public consultation opened on 9 March 2026 and ran for 12 weeks, closing on 1 June 2026.

Respondents could submit views and feedback online via the Citizen Space survey, provide written responses by post or email, or submit their views by telephone. Citizen Space is the Northern Ireland Civil Service's recommended online consultation and survey tool. Digital tools were used to support drafting and quality assurance. All content has been reviewed, verified and approved by officials.

The consultation sought views on the proposed rural policy vision, aim, objectives, guiding principles, and five strategic proposals. It provided an opportunity for respondents to share their experiences of rural life and identify challenges and opportunities. It also provided an opportunity for respondents to provide insights on how people and government can work together to better understand, champion and support rural Northern Ireland.

The consultation document² contained 18 questions. To capture the strength of respondents' views, most questions used structured response scales, ranging from 'Very important' to 'Not important at all' and from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. One question used a 'Yes' or 'No'

DAERA published the following documents on its website:

- Public Consultation Document - Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041
- A5 Summary Document
- Easy Read Consultation Document
- Rural Needs Impact Assessment
- Equality Impact Assessment
- Working Group Reports

These materials were made available in alternative formats upon request, ensuring accessibility for all participants.

² [Public Consultation on Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041](#) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



response, and one question invited written responses only. Most questions provided an opportunity for respondents to provide additional comments. All responses are held securely in line with Departmental data protection policies.

The views and quotations included in this report are those of the respondents and are not necessarily shared by DAERA.

As part of the policy development process, DAERA undertook a number of impact assessments. These included an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA), and a Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA), which were published on the DAERA website³. As part of the consultation process, views were sought on these Impact Assessments.

Pre-Consultation Events and Information Sessions

The Department held several targeted information sessions with various groups, including agricultural representatives, the business sector, equality promotion groups, and organisations representing children and young people. These sessions were held to raise awareness of the consultation process and gather views on both the process and the draft policy.

Public Consultation Events

Throughout the consultation period the Department ran 11 in-person public consultation events across Northern Ireland. A full list of these events is available at Annex A. These events were open to everyone, with the opportunity to either pre-register on Eventbrite for any event or attend in person on the day. Alongside the in-person public consultation events, the Department held two online events; one during the early stages of the consultation, and one nearer the closing date of the consultation.

Events were promoted through the DAERA website and social media accounts. The Department also reached out to partners involved in the co-design process, equality promotion groups and business and agriculture sectors to promote awareness and to encourage engagement.

All views shared during these events were captured through an interactive technology called Mentimeter or recorded by Departmental officials. Mentimeter was used as a digital tool to facilitate individual engagement and display an immediate visual representation of participants' views. Each event was structured around four key questions aligned to the consultation themes and responses were collected anonymously.

³ [Public Consultation on Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041](#) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



Analysis Methodology

Using the NI Direct Citizen Space portal, survey respondents were asked 18 questions related to the key elements of the draft policy, **Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041**, including the proposed vision, aim, objectives, guiding principles and the five strategic proposals. Varying numbers of respondents across each question offered additional comments and views. There was significant variation in the level of detail, length and style of the additional supporting information received.

Alongside the responses submitted online, a number of written and emailed responses were received and included in the analysis. As not all respondents answered every question, percentages are calculated using the number of responses received for each individual question rather than the overall consultation total of 136 responses.

The questions posed to attendees of public engagement events were framed to gather broader insights into the policy development. Attendees were provided with an overview of the policy proposals during the sessions and signposted to the Citizen Space survey where they were invited to provide more detailed responses. For this reason, responses from the consultation events were analysed separately and independently. The responses were considered alongside the Citizen Space survey data to provide a more complete picture of stakeholder views.

The Department recognises that a number of consultation responses were submitted by membership-based organisations. In considering the balance of evidence, the Department will have regard to the distinction between organisational submissions and individual responses, recognising both the breadth of representation provided by organisations and the lived experience reflected in individual contributions. A full list of organisational respondents is listed at Annex B. This approach seeks to ensure that all responses are considered in a proportionate and transparent manner, without assigning undue weighting to any single category of respondents. Therefore, Annex C provides a breakdown of the responses across individuals and organisations.

All responses received were reviewed and considered in the analysis. This report presents a summary of the key findings and recurring themes and should not be regarded as a comprehensive record of every individual response. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

A total of
136 Responses
to the consultation
were received (91
via the online survey
and 45 written/email
returns).

57 of the responses
(42%) were from
individuals

with **79**
(58%) coming from
organisations.



Douglas Bridge, County Tyrone

4. Responses from Consultation Events

Consultation Event Process

At each of the public consultation events, four questions were posed to attendees. Participants were asked to submit short words or phrases through Mentimeter, with each individual entry limited to 25 characters. The word clouds present the combined responses from all events visually, with more frequently submitted terms appearing more prominently. The responses presented in this section reflect the feedback gathered for each question across all consultation events⁴.

Responses were grouped into themes, and some responses could reasonably align with more than one theme. However, for the purposes of this report, each response has been assigned to the most relevant theme, taking account of the context of the question. 14 responses were classified as 'Unclear or Other' where the information provided could not be confidently interpreted, for example due to unclear wording, spelling errors, or the use of unrecognised abbreviations. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

⁴ Responses submitted through Mentimeter are presented as provided by respondents. The wording used reflects respondents' own descriptions or terminology.



Summary of Responses from Consultation Events

Question 1. Imagine Rural Northern Ireland in 15 years. What would you like your rural area to look like?

What We Heard Overall

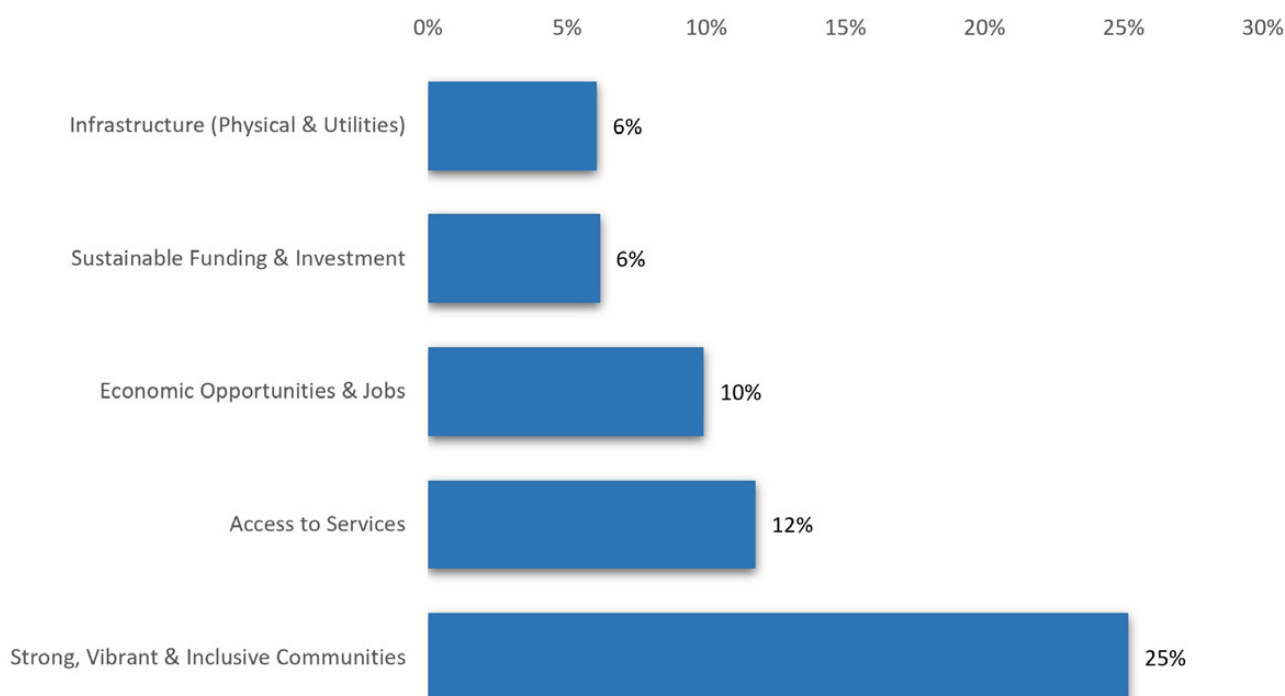
Participants described a future rural Northern Ireland as vibrant, thriving, inclusive, connected, with strong, resilient communities. Responses highlighted the importance of accessible local services, including healthcare, education, childcare and retail, alongside improved transport links, digital connectivity and employment, business development, affordable housing, and retaining young people and families.

These aspirations were linked to calls for long-term, flexible and adequately resourced funding to support community, local initiatives and business growth. Participants also referenced investment in infrastructure and community facilities, the role of agriculture and rural enterprise, and the importance of clean environments and access to green space.

Key Themes from Question 1

The following top five key themes reflect the most frequently raised topics across 858 responses to this question:

Figure 1 - Key Themes





Most Frequently Occurring Terms

The most frequently repeated terms across responses are represented below:

Figure 2 - Word Cloud of Frequent Words and Phrases



Additional Responses

In addition to Mentimeter responses, facilitators recorded comments and feedback during consultation events, which have been considered as part of the overall analysis. A summary of this feedback is set out below.

Participants commonly described a future for rural Northern Ireland that will be vibrant, thriving and well connected, with improved transport links, digital connectivity and access to services. There was frequent reference to the need for local jobs, small businesses and support for agriculture and tourism, alongside calls for investment in infrastructure, including roads, broadband and water services. Responses highlighted the importance of strong, active communities, vibrant villages, access to schools, childcare, healthcare and community facilities, and support for local services. Participants also raised issues around planning, housing and development. A consistent theme was the need for access to services and investment across rural areas.



Question 2. What would help us better understand the challenges and opportunities in rural areas?

What We Heard Overall

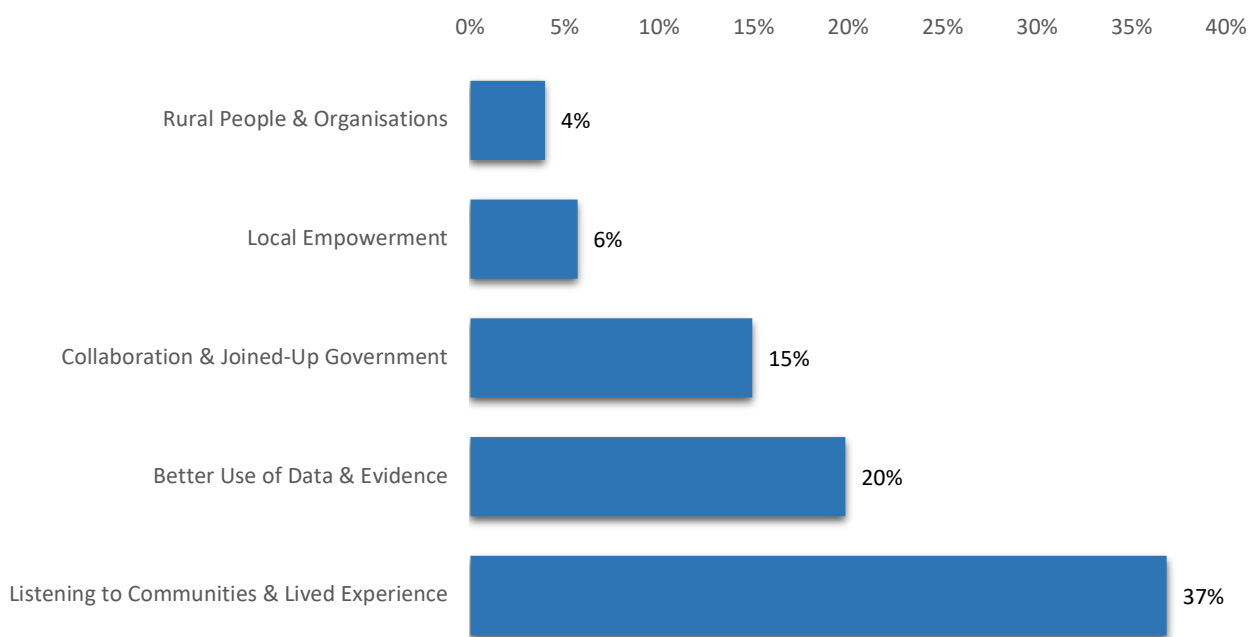
Participants referenced the need for government to engage directly with communities to better understand rural issues, including speaking to local residents, specific interest groups and those with lived experience. Responses highlighted the importance of the use of data and evidence, including localised data, case studies, research and area-based analysis.

Participants referred to combining qualitative insights with quantitative data, and to using community-led or participatory approaches. There were also references to collaboration between organisations and the sharing of information across sectors. Some responses noted the importance of recognising differences between rural areas when gathering and using evidence.

Key Themes from Question 2

The following top five key themes reflect the most frequently raised topics across 529 responses to this question:

Figure 3 - Key Themes





Most Frequently Occurring Terms

The most frequently repeated terms across responses are represented below:

Figure 4 - Word Cloud of Frequent Words and Phrases



Additional Responses

In addition to Mentimeter responses, facilitators recorded comments and feedback during consultation events, which have been considered as part of the overall analysis. A summary of this feedback is set out below.

Participants emphasised the importance of engaging directly with communities, particularly those who are less likely to have their views heard and highlighted a preference for face to face interaction and building trust. The value of data and evidence was acknowledged, alongside comments on making better use of existing information and incorporating lived experience.

Participants also referred to repeated government consultation activity, with calls for clearer links between consultation responses and resulting policy actions. It was noted that rural areas differ in their characteristics and circumstances, with references to the need for approaches that reflect local context.

Feedback highlighted the importance of using a range of communication methods to improve accessibility, including for those without digital access. Overall, participants pointed to the need for effective listening and timely action.



Question 3. What support would help shape a thriving, sustainable and inclusive rural NI?

What We Heard Overall

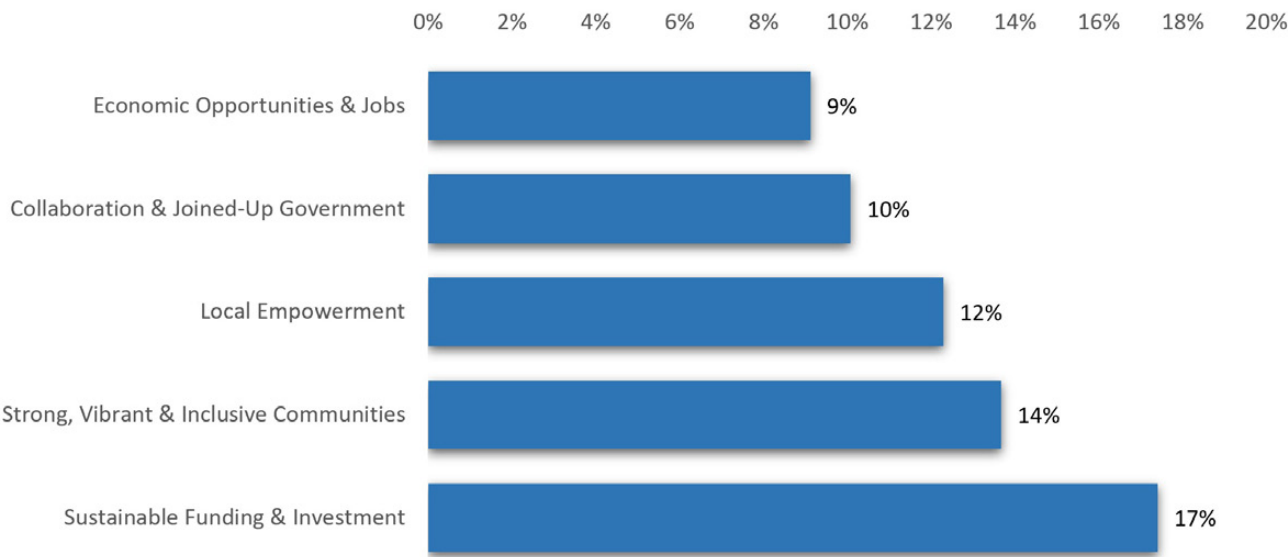
Participants identified funding and financial support as an important requirement, with references to long-term, flexible and accessible funding. Responses pointed to the need for collaboration and joined-up working across government departments and sectors, alongside improved coordination in the delivery of programmes and services.

Participants referred to capacity building, leadership and support for community-led initiatives, as well as the need for simplified application processes and clearer funding pathways. There were also references to support for local services, childcare, infrastructure, business development and digital connectivity. Overall, responses identified that a range of support is required, including sustainable funding, improved coordination, enhanced service provision and investment in community development.

Key Themes from Question 3

The following top five key themes reflect the most frequently raised topics across 724 responses to this question:

Figure 5 - Key Themes





Most Frequently Occurring Terms

The most frequently repeated terms across responses are represented below:

Figure 6 - Word Cloud of Frequent Words and Phrases



Additional Responses

In addition to Mentimeter responses, facilitators recorded comments and feedback during consultation events, which have been considered as part of the overall analysis. A summary of this feedback is set out below.

Participants highlighted the importance of stable, accessible and flexible funding, including the value of small scale programmes and longer term arrangements. Feedback noted the need for community capacity, including governance, skills development and succession planning, alongside pressures on volunteers.

Infrastructure and key services, such as transport, healthcare, housing and childcare, were identified as important, as was support for economic activity including local businesses, farming and tourism, with some challenges in access noted.

Participants also referred to the need for improved cross government coordination and approaches that respond to local circumstances.



Question 4. Who needs to be involved to ensure a strong and diverse voice to champion rural?

What We Heard Overall

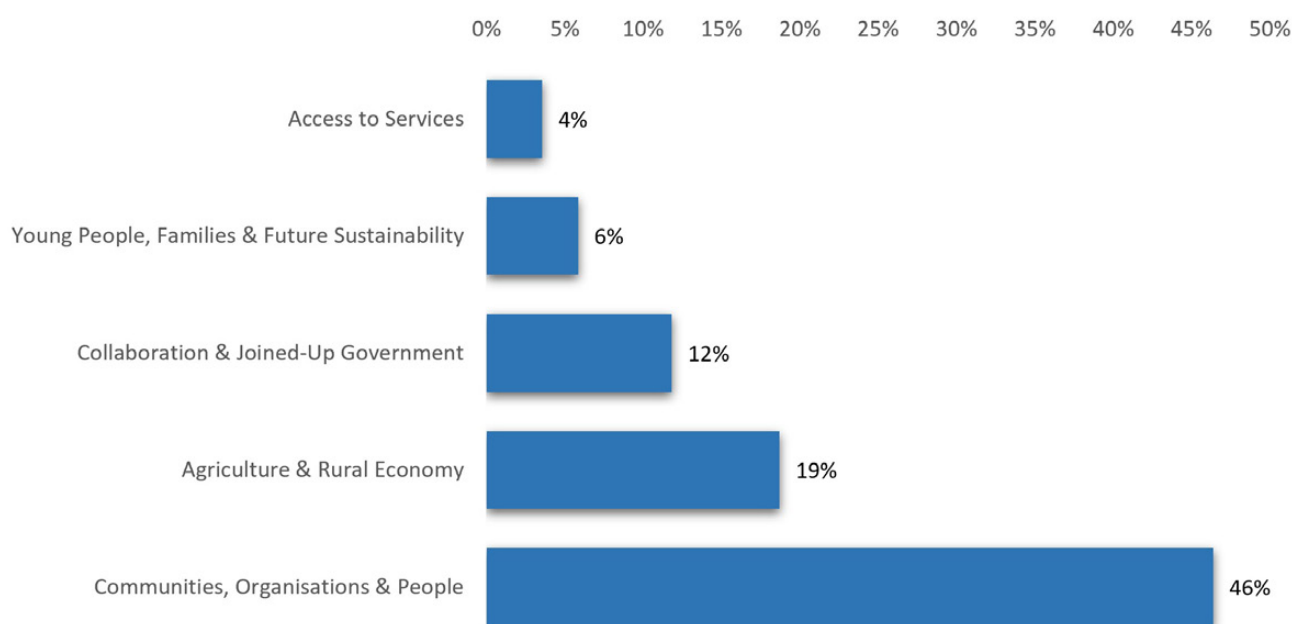
Participants identified a wide range of stakeholders who should be involved, including local people, voluntary and community organisations, sporting and faith-based groups. Responses also referenced the inclusion of young people, older people, families, and minority or underrepresented groups.

There were references to involvement from local and central government, elected representatives, statutory agencies, and service providers, including those in health, education and transport. Participants mentioned farmers, rural businesses and sectoral organisations, as well as environmental and special interest groups. Overall, responses identified a broad range of stakeholders across community, government and sectoral groups.

Key Themes from Question 4

The following top five key themes reflect the most frequently raised topics across 871 responses to this question:

Figure 7 - Key Themes





Most Frequently Occurring Terms

The most frequently repeated terms across responses are represented below:

Figure 8 - Word Cloud of Frequent Words and Phrases



Additional Responses

In addition to Mentimeter responses, facilitators recorded comments and feedback during consultation events, which have been considered as part of the overall analysis. A summary of this feedback is set out below.

Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring rural voices are inclusive and representative, with references to involving a wide range of groups, particularly those less frequently heard, including young people and minority groups.

Voluntary and Community organisations, as well as local networks such as schools, faith groups and sports organisations, were highlighted as important for engagement. Participants also referred to the need for the engagement of young people to adapt communication methods accordingly.

Feedback referred to leadership, including local or independent champions, in representing rural perspectives. Participants also raised accessible and proactive engagement approaches that reduce barriers to participation.



River Kesh flowing under the
arched bridge in the centre
of Kesh village in County
Fermanagh

5. Summary of Consultation Responses

Consultation Approach

The consultation included structured questions on the draft policy proposals, vision, aim, objectives, guiding principles and impact assessments, using standard agreement/importance scales. 11 questions focused on agreement with the five strategic policy proposals, while others addressed broader policy elements. One open-ended question on priorities was qualitatively analysed only.

Respondents were invited to provide comments for each question, with input varying in detail and length. Only respondents who provided an answer to the individual questions were included in the quantitative analysis.

The valuable feedback received will be used to update the rural policy proposals. The feedback and suggestions received will also help inform the development of delivery-focused action plans.

This report provides a summary of the key themes and issues raised during the consultation. While every response has been considered as part of the analysis, it is not possible to reflect every individual comment or viewpoint expressed by respondents.



Overview of Feedback

Overall, feedback indicated strong support for DAERA's policy and proposals, particularly across the five policy areas. Common themes of agreement emerged across responses, alongside a range of additional insights.

Agreement for the Vision, Aim, Objectives and Principles ranged from 77% to 86%, while negative responses ranged from 7% to 11%.

Support across the policy proposals ranged from 72% to 93%, with negative responses ranging from 3% to 14%. A few respondents expressed repeated disagreement across all questions. For the combined percentage of support across all questions please refer to Annex D. The level of support expressed by individual respondents is presented in Annex E, and the level of support expressed by organisational respondents is presented in Annex F.

Strategic Direction

Response to the Vision

The Vision:

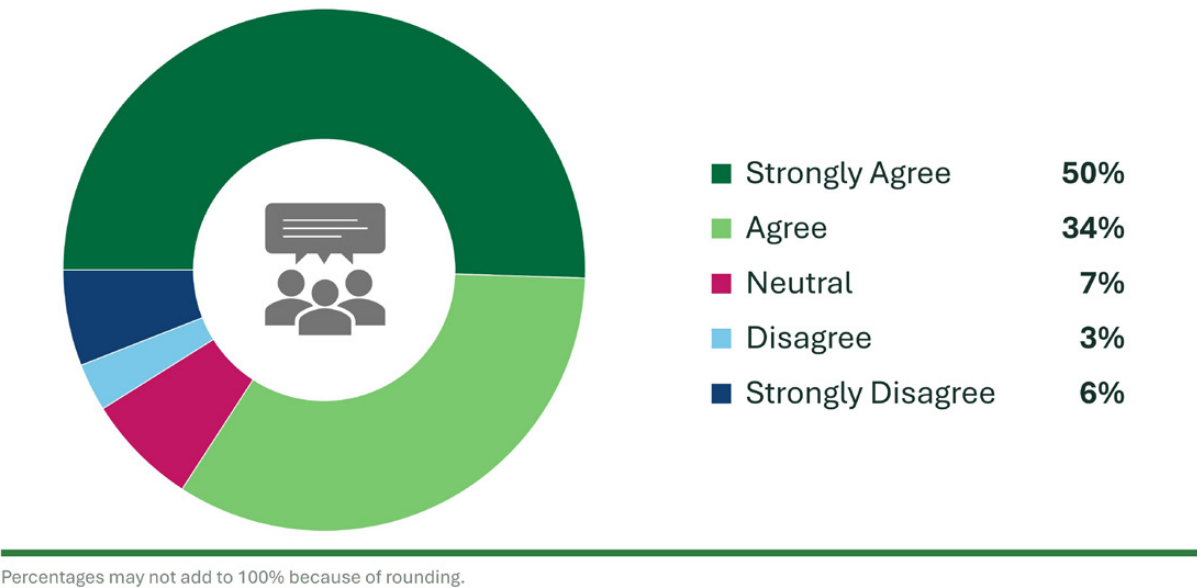
"People and Government working together to shape a thriving, sustainable and inclusive rural Northern Ireland"

Question 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed vision for Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041?

Of the 125 responses submitted for this question, 84% agreed with the vision of the proposed rural policy, with 50% strongly agreeing and 34% agreeing. 9% of respondents disagreed overall, with 3% disagreeing and 6% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed strong overall support for the proposed vision. Respondents broadly welcomed its ambition, inclusiveness and focus on cross-government working.



Figure 9 - Level of Support for the Proposed Vision



Individual and Organisational Responses

70% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed), compared with 95% of organisations, while 18% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed), compared with 2% of organisations.

Figure 10 - Level of Support From Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key themes from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents described the vision as clear, inclusive and ambitious, and many highlighted the focus on collaboration between people and government and a long-term approach.
- Respondents welcomed the cross-government focus and recognition of rural diversity.
- The value of stronger partnership with local communities was highlighted, including voluntary and community groups, community halls, clubs and other grassroots organisations.
- Some respondents welcomed a broader rural focus that recognised access to services, connectivity, quality of life, and the need for rural voices to have greater influence in decision-making.
- Respondents said the vision needed clearer explanation of what it would mean in practice.
- Comments referred to accessibility, transport, fairness, and what “thriving rural communities” would involve.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- The vision being too general, particularly with the need for stronger emphasis on farming and food production.
- The vision should include clearer links to practical delivery and implementation.
- Environmental framing (e.g. net zero, land-use pressures) and considered the wording as too broad or not sufficiently grounded in lived rural experience.



Response to the Aim

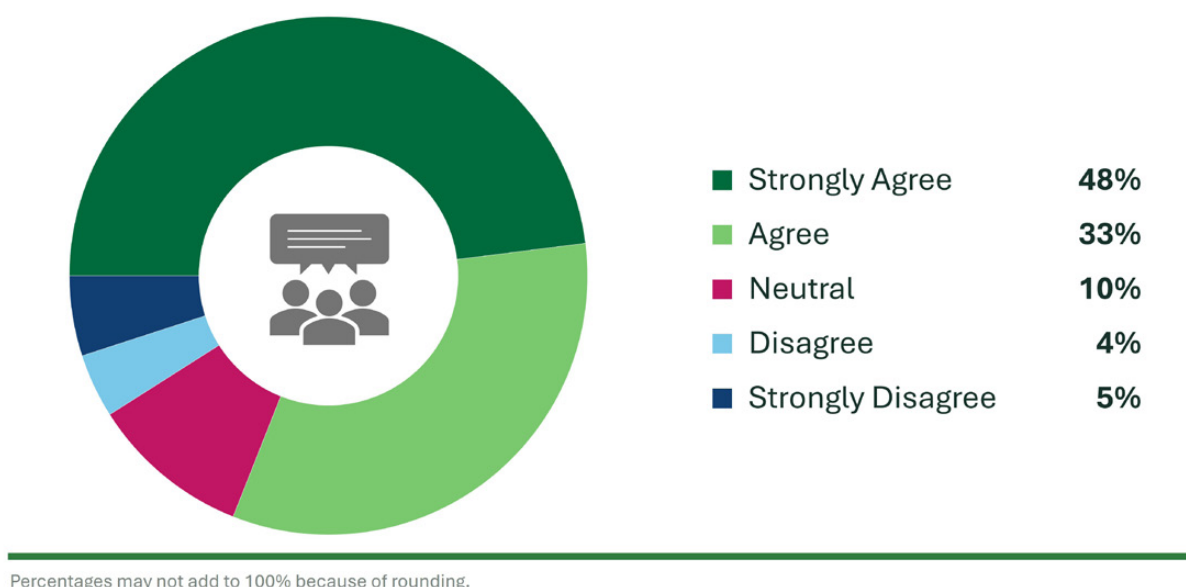
Question 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed aim for Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041?

The Aim:

“To understand, champion and support rural Northern Ireland.”

Of the 124 responses submitted for this question, 81% agreed with the aim of the proposed rural policy, with 48% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing. 9% of respondents disagreed overall, with 4% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed strong overall support for the proposed aim. Respondents said the ‘understand, champion and support’ approach was clear and logical, while emphasising the importance of translating this into practical action and measurable outcomes.

Figure 11 - Level of Support for the Proposed Aim

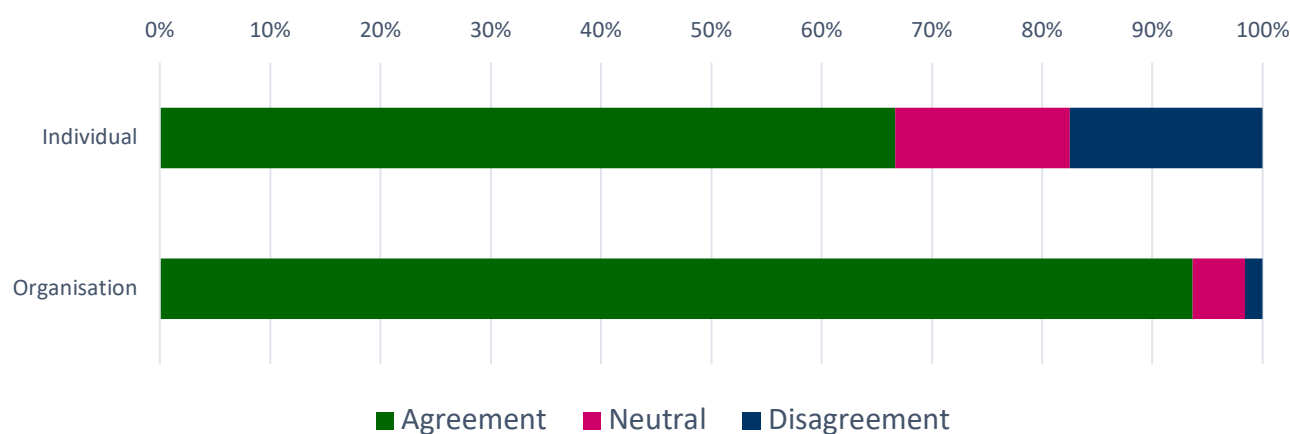


Individual and Organisational Responses

67% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the aim of the proposed rural policy, compared with 94% of organisations, while 18% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.



Figure 12 - Level of Support From Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents widely supported the sequencing of ‘understand, champion, support’, noting that understanding rural needs should come first and guide action.
- The aim was described as clear and appropriate, particularly in supporting better coordination across government departments.
- Respondents emphasised the importance of ensuring the aim leads to measurable outcomes, rather than remaining a high-level statement.
- The need to reflect practical issues such as transport, accessibility and mobility was highlighted, particularly within the ‘understanding’ stage.
- Respondents noted that ‘support’ should include improving access to services and addressing barriers experienced by rural communities.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- The aim being too high-level or process-driven, with limited reference to delivery or outcomes.
- The need for clearer emphasis on economic development and resourcing.
- Concerns that the aim lacked sufficient clarity on how it would be implemented in practice.



Response to the Objectives

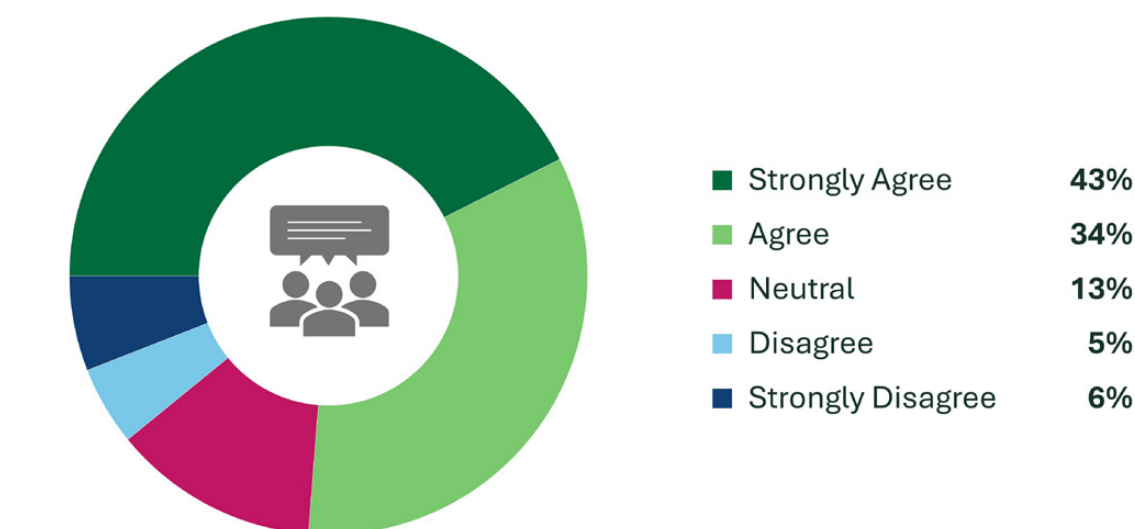
Question 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed objectives of Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041?

The Objectives:

- a. To improve the scope, relevance, accessibility and timeliness of rural research, statistics and other evidence and their use across government.*
- b. To inform, influence and support strategic government policy from a rural perspective.*
- c. To promote and support innovative, collaborative government action on rural challenges and opportunities.*

Of the 126 responses submitted for this question, 77% agreed with the objectives of the proposed rural policy, with 43% strongly agreeing and 34% agreeing. 11% of respondents disagreed overall, with 5% disagreeing and 6% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed overall support for the proposed objectives. Respondents welcomed their focus on evidence, influence and collaboration, but emphasised the need for clearer outcomes and broader coverage of key issues.

Figure 13 - Level of Support for the Proposed Objectives



Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.



Individual and Organisational Responses

65% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the objectives of the proposed rural policy, compared with 86% of organisations, while 21% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.

Figure 14 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents supported the structure and focus of the objectives, particularly the emphasis on evidence, influence and collaboration.
- The objectives were seen as logical and aligned, helping to support a coordinated approach across government.
- Respondents highlighted the need for the objectives to be more outcome-focused, with clearer links to measurable results.
- Many called for additional objectives to cover areas such as economic development, environmental sustainability and equality.
- The importance of stronger accountability across government departments was also raised.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- The objectives being too process-focused and lacking clear outcomes.
- Concerns about limited scope and ambition.
- The need for clearer links to delivery and practical implementation.



Response to the Principles

Question 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the guiding principles of Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041?

The Principles:

Collaborative: People, communities, and government working together across sectors, sharing responsibility to make the most of opportunities and tackle rural challenges.

Community-Led: Rural communities are supported and empowered to have an inclusive voice, influence decisions, and help shape the interventions that affect their lives.

Sustainable: Focus on long-term solutions to protect our natural environment and support a Just Transition to a low carbon society, that is equipped to respond to our changing climate.

Evidence-Based: Value and promote evidence, including research, relevant and trustworthy data, and people's lived experiences, to guide decisions that affect rural communities.

Adaptive: Provide flexible, regional and local support that meets diverse needs and adapting to emerging opportunities and challenges as they arise.

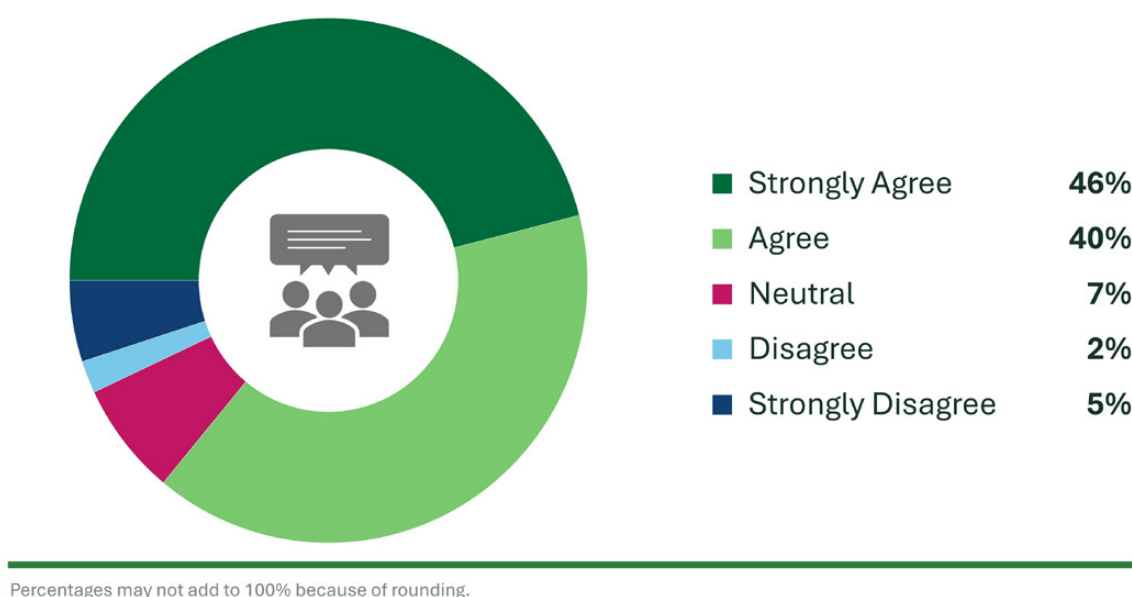
Strengths-Based: Build on the strengths already found in rural communities, including their social, economic, natural, cultural, and physical assets.

Connected: Work in partnership with organisations and communities across the UK, Republic of Ireland, the EU and wider, sharing knowledge, experience and good practice.



Of the 126 responses submitted for this question, 86% agreed with the guiding principles of the proposed rural policy, with 46% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing. 7% of respondents disagreed, with 2% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed strong support for the proposed guiding principles. Respondents generally viewed them as well aligned with the overall approach, particularly highlighting collaboration, community-led action and sustainability.

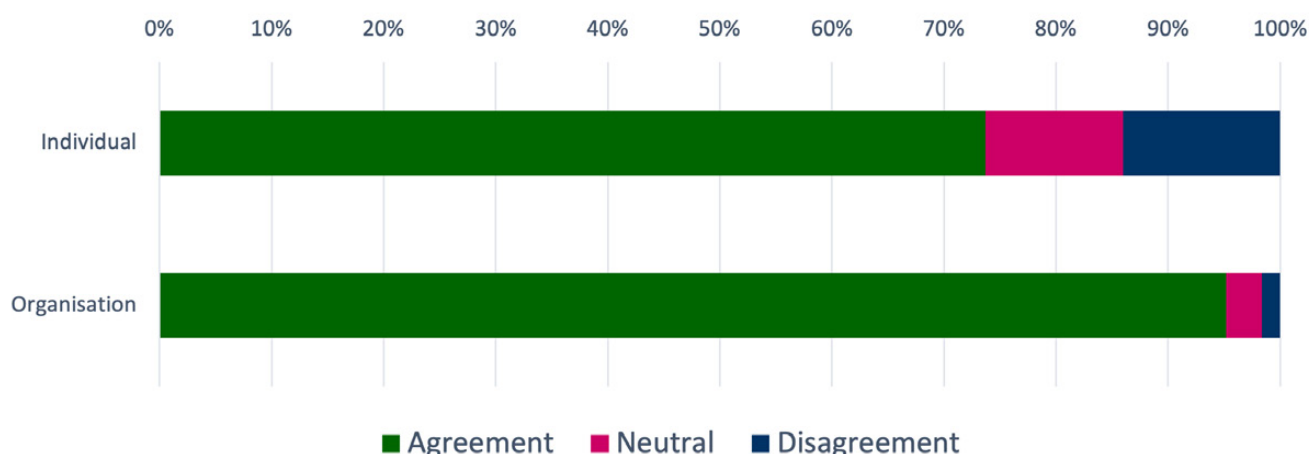
Figure 15 - Level of Support for the Proposed Guiding Principles



Individual and Organisational Responses

74% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the guiding principles of the proposed rural policy, compared with 95% of organisations, while 14% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.

Figure 16 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations





Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents welcomed the principles as comprehensive and well aligned with the overall approach.
- Collaboration, community-led action and sustainability were particularly valued across responses.
- Respondents suggested that accessibility and equity should be more explicitly reflected within the principles.
- The need to strengthen environmental and climate considerations was highlighted.
- Respondents emphasised that the principles should lead to practical action and not remain at a high level.

In addition, respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- A lack of clarity or definition around some of the terms used.
- The need for a clearer explanation of how the principles would be applied in practice.



Policy Proposals

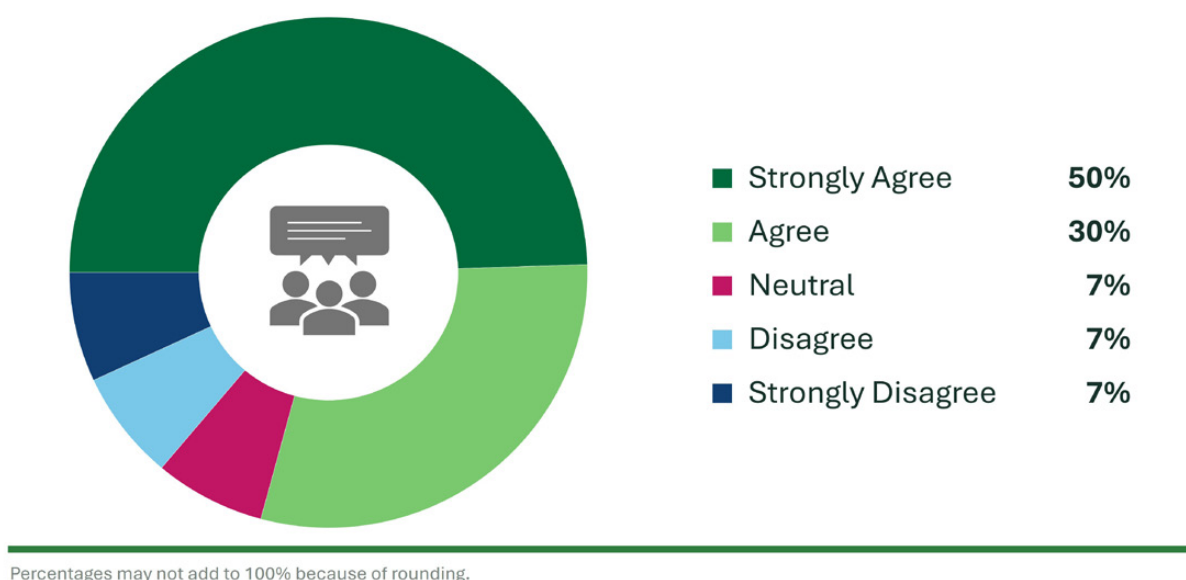
Proposal 1: Putting Rural Voices at the Heart of Government

Response to the Rural Champions Model

Question 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed Rural Champions Model as a way to ensure rural voices are heard in government decision-making?

Of the 122 responses submitted for this question, 80% agreed with the proposed Rural Champions Model, with 50% strongly agreeing and 30% agreeing. 14% of respondents disagreed overall, with 7% disagreeing and 7% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were broadly supportive of the Rural Champions Model. Respondents recognised the potential value of a dedicated role to strengthen representation and coordination of rural issues. However, support was often conditional, with concerns about whether the model would have sufficient authority, accountability and resources to influence decisions in practice.

Figure 17 - Level of Support for the Rural Champions Model

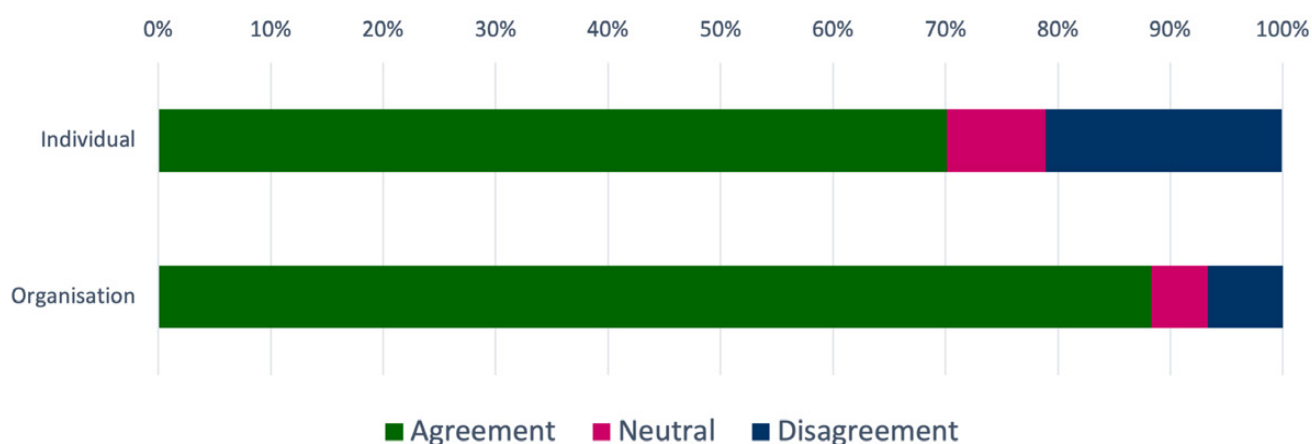


Individual and Organisational Responses

70% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the proposed Rural Champions Model, compared with 88% of organisations, while 21% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 7% of organisations.



Figure 18 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

The Rural Champions Model

- Responses highlighted broad support for the Rural Champions Model as a way to improve cross-government coordination and ensure rural issues are consistently represented. Key suggestions included, clear accountability and public reporting mechanisms, strong ministerial backing, the authority to influence cross-departmental decision-making and a route for rural stakeholders to raise issues that cut across departmental boundaries.
- There were concerns that the Rural Champions Model could become advisory, tokenistic or overly centralised without strong governance.
- A small number of respondents expressed concerns that the proposed Rural Champions Model did not place sufficient emphasis on farming and agriculture.
- Views were expressed that the model should reflect principles similar to those underpinning the Mental Health Champion, with support and engagement across government.

The Rural Champion Role

- Respondents emphasised that the effectiveness of the Rural Champion Role would depend on the authority, influence and status attached to the position. Key points raised included the need for the Rural Champion to operate at a senior level, have formal links with other departments, and possess the ability to escalate unresolved cross-departmental issues.



- Respondents suggested that the Rural Champion Role should include oversight of RNIAs and help ensure that rural considerations are reflected more consistently and at an earlier stage of policy development.
- Some respondents questioned whether a single Rural Champion could adequately represent the diversity of rural interests, suggesting alternative approaches such as departmental champions or an independent, non-government champion. Others noted the need for greater clarity on how the Rural Champion Role would move beyond representing rural views to influencing policy outcomes.
- Respondents also sought greater clarity on how the Rural Champion Role would interact with other proposed structures and contribute to delivering outcomes for rural communities.

Local Strategic Rural Partnerships

- Respondents highlighted the potential value of Local Strategic Rural Partnerships in providing a place-based voice for rural communities but highlighted the need for a clear escalation route, defined responsibilities and a shared delivery framework across departments and local councils.

Rural Regional Stakeholder Forum

- Respondents welcomed the concept and highlighted the importance of ensuring that the Rural Regional Stakeholder Forum is representative of a broad range of rural interests, including the nature and environmental sector alongside farming. There were calls for meaningful involvement of grassroots organisations, local communities and existing sectoral networks, supported by adequate resources, reimbursement arrangements and dedicated secretariat support.

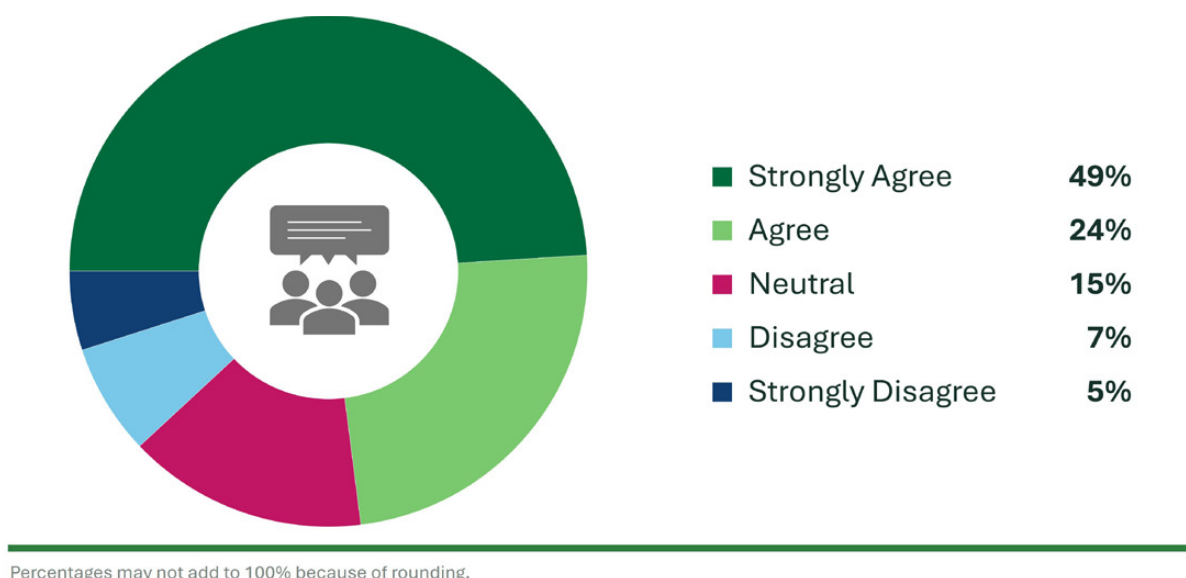


Response to the Rural Collaboration Fund

Question 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that a Rural Collaboration Fund will support joint working across government to develop solutions for cross-cutting rural issues and new opportunities?

Of the 118 responses submitted for this question, 73% agreed with the Rural Collaboration Fund, with 49% strongly agreeing and 24% agreeing. 12% of respondents disagreed overall, with 7% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed strong support for the proposed Rural Collaboration Fund. Respondents recognised its potential to support joined-up working and deliver practical solutions, although concerns were raised about scale, targeting and implementation.

Figure 19 - Level of Support for the Rural Collaboration Fund



Individual and Organisational Responses

58% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the Rural Collaboration Fund, compared with 86% of organisations, while 25% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) with none of the organisations who responded expressing disagreement with the Rural Collaboration Fund.



Figure 20 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents were broadly supportive of the proposed Rural Collaboration Fund and welcomed its basis on the principles of the TRPSI Framework 2016. There was strong support for collaborative approaches to rural proofing and for greater cross-departmental and cross-sector working to address rural issues that extend beyond the responsibilities of any single department. Respondents emphasised that all departments have a role to play in developing solutions for rural communities and that the Rural Collaboration Fund should support new ways of working, as well as the provision of funding.
- Respondents highlighted the potential for the Rural Collaboration Fund to deliver practical, place-based solutions and visible improvements for rural communities. Suggested priority areas included community facilities, health and wellbeing initiatives, access to greenspace, active travel and community trail networks, accessibility improvements, and support for community-led projects. Many stressed the importance of ensuring that funding reaches disadvantaged and remote rural communities.
- Key considerations raised included the need for adequate resourcing, multi-year funding commitments, clear governance arrangements and proportionate administration. While respondents recognised the Rural Collaboration Fund's potential to support collaborative delivery and improve outcomes for rural communities, some expressed concern about the risk of excessive bureaucracy and called for straightforward and accessible funding processes.



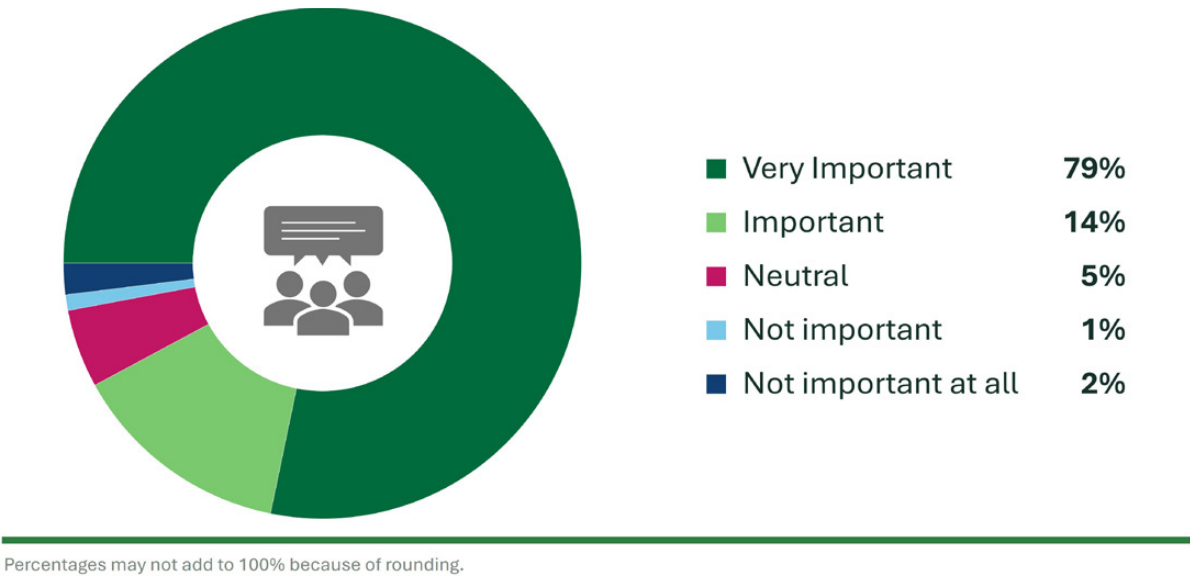
Proposal 2: Local Partnerships for Local Impact

Response to Local Partnerships

Question 7. How important or unimportant is it for local councils and the Northern Ireland Executive to work more closely together on rural issues?

Of the 118 responses submitted for this question, 93% of respondents agreed with closer working between local councils and the Northern Ireland Executive on rural issues, with 79% considering this very important and 14% important. 3% of respondents considered it unimportant, with 1% not important and 2% not important at all. Responses to this question showed very strong support for closer working between local councils and the Northern Ireland Executive. Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of effective collaboration for delivering rural policy and services. They also highlighted the active involvement of local voluntary and community groups as key partners in identifying local needs, shaping priorities, and supporting delivery at local level.

Figure 21 - Level of Support for Closer Working between Councils and the NI Executive

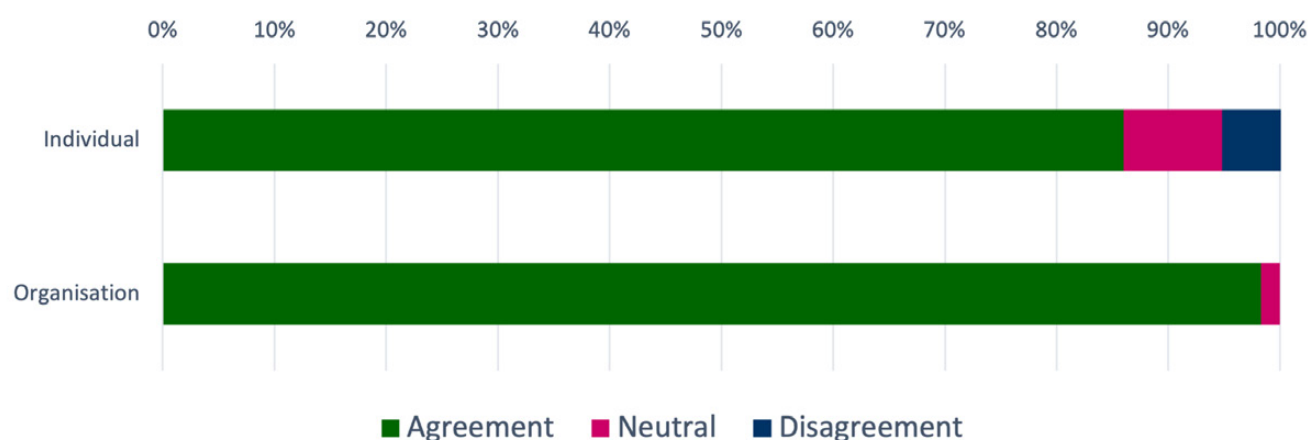


Individual and Organisational Responses

86% of individuals considered closer working between local councils and the Northern Ireland Executive on rural issues important (very important and important), compared with 98% of organisations, while 5% of individuals considered it unimportant (not important and not important at all) compared with none of the organisations who responded expressing disagreement.



Figure 22 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents strongly supported closer working as essential for effective delivery.
- Local councils were valued for their local knowledge and understanding of community needs.
- Collaboration was seen as particularly important for cross-cutting issues such as transport, health, housing and community development.
- Respondents highlighted the need for clear structures, shared accountability and proper resourcing.
- Respondents provided specific suggestions for the clear structures, defined purpose and roles.
- Some respondents emphasised the importance of local flexibility, including partnership arrangements that extend beyond individual local council boundaries where neighbouring areas face similar rural challenges.
- Some respondents stressed that Local Strategic Rural Partnerships should be community-led, with active involvement from local communities and voluntary and community groups.
- Consideration should be given to how Local Strategic Rural Partnerships will align with and complement local Council Community Planning structures.



- The importance of data and evidence sharing was highlighted.
- Some respondents suggested a cyclical action-planning approach to support implementation and ongoing engagement.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Potential bureaucracy or politicisation.
- The need to ensure arrangements remain grounded in local needs.
- Support was expressed for community-led sustainability projects, including climate action and biodiversity initiatives.

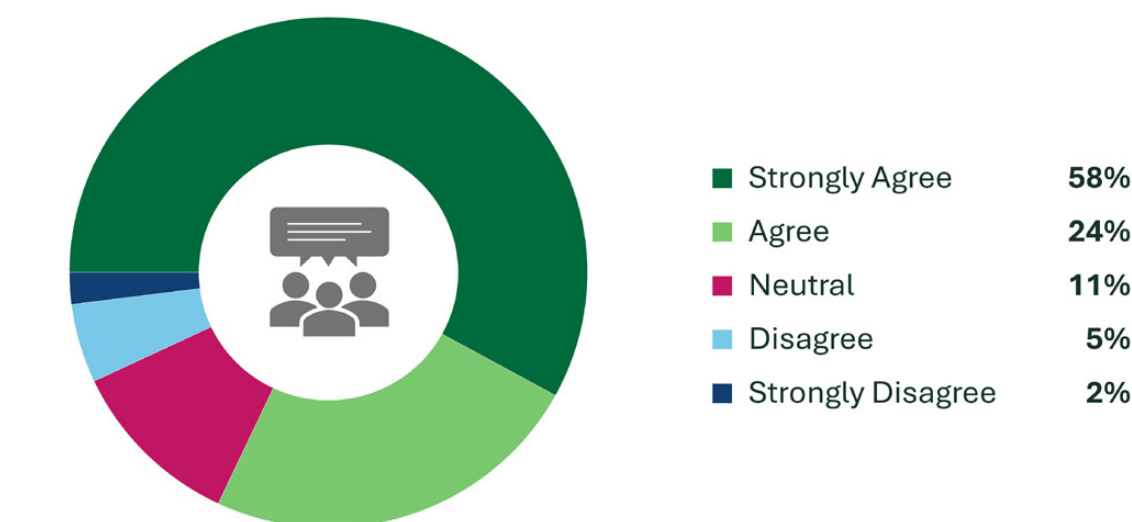


Response to DAERA Enabling Rural Fund

Question 8. To what extent would you agree or disagree that the introduction of the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund would help unlock extra investment for rural communities?

Of the 120 responses submitted for this question, 82% agreed the introduction of the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund would help unlock extra investment for rural communities, with 58% strongly agreeing and 24% agreeing. 7% of respondents disagreed overall, with 5% disagreeing and 2% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were broadly supportive of the proposed DAERA Enabling Rural Fund, recognising its potential to attract additional investment into rural communities and support community-led development. Respondents sought further information and greater clarity on the fund, with some highlighting a number of important considerations for the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund's design and implementation.

Figure 23 - Level of Support for the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund



Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Individual and Organisational Responses

74% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) the introduction of the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund would help unlock extra investment for rural communities, compared with 90% of organisations, while 12% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.



Figure 24 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents viewed the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund as an important means of supporting the wider rural economy, strengthening community resilience and addressing local needs.
- Respondents highlighted the need for accessible and proportionate application processes, alongside capacity-building support, to enable equitable access to funding for smaller and volunteer-led organisations.
- Concerns were raised about complexity, fairness of distribution and consistency of decision-making.
- Greater flexibility in funding arrangements was requested, including longer-term and multi-year funding approaches to support planning and sustainable delivery.
- Some respondents emphasised that it should complement and add value to existing funding streams, avoid duplication and help maximise overall impact.
- Respondents provided specific suggestions on how the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund should operate in practice.
- Respondents highlighted the need for flexibility to reflect local priorities and retain local decision-making.
- Suggestions were made to pilot the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund before full implementation.



- The importance of networking, partnership-building and collaboration was emphasised.
- Some respondents suggested a role for Local Strategic Rural Partnerships in the administration and allocation of the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund.
- Some respondents expressed a lack of confidence in local councils' ability to support local delivery.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- The need for adequate resources, clear governance and greater clarity on the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund's operation, parameters and long-term sustainability.
- The need to consider how the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund will be equitably distributed, to ensure that smaller organisations are not excluded.
- A wide range of activities was proposed for inclusion within the DAERA Enabling Rural Fund's parameters, spanning community infrastructure, rural economic development, sustainability and accessibility.



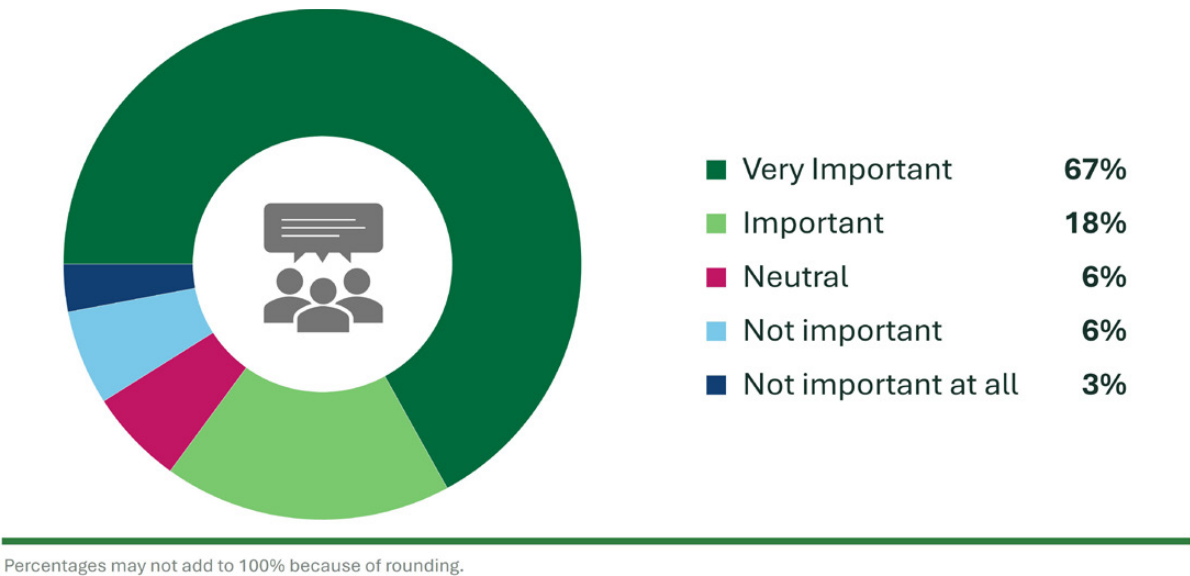
Proposal 3: Understanding Rural

Response to Rural Baseline Study

Question 9. How important or unimportant do you think it is to carry out a Rural Baseline Study with repeated studies at regular intervals to track changes and plan for the future?

Of the 119 responses submitted for this question, 85% agreed with carrying out a Rural Baseline Study at regular intervals, with 67% considering this very important and 18% important. 9% of respondents considered it unimportant, with 6% not important and 3% not important at all. Responses to this question showed very strong support for developing a Rural Baseline Study. Respondents highlighted the importance of having better and more detailed data to understand rural issues and support decision-making.

Figure 25 - Level of Support for the Rural Baseline Study



Individual and Organisational Responses

72% of individuals considered carrying out a Rural Baseline Study at regular intervals important (very important and important), compared with 97% of organisations, while 19% of individuals considered it unimportant (not important and not important at all) compared with none of the organisations who responded expressing disagreement.



Figure 26 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Some respondents expressed the opinion that regular Rural Baseline Studies are among the most important structural commitments of the proposed policy.
- Respondents strongly supported the need for better data to understand rural communities and track change over time.
- There was strong support for keeping the data up to date, so it remains useful.
- A significant number of respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that the Rural Baseline Study is informed by both quantitative and qualitative evidence, including the lived experiences of people across rural communities, and ensuring that it provides a robust basis for monitoring and evaluating progress against policy objectives.
- Some respondents emphasised that the Rural Baseline Study should lead to action and not be a stand-alone exercise.
- Respondents made specific suggestions on the scope of the Rural Baseline Study, recommending a broader evidence base covering local service access, transport and connectivity, community resilience, social wellbeing, economic conditions and rural-specific issues, including those affecting farming communities.
- Some respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that the Rural Baseline Study reflects issues relevant to farming communities, including farm viability, rural crime, animal health, soil health, biodiversity and cross-border considerations.



- Respondents highlighted the potential for the data gathered through the Rural Baseline Study to support evidence-based policy development.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Concerns regarding the cost of the Rural Baseline Study and the potential for duplication with existing evidence sources.
- The value of the Rural Baseline Study if its findings are not used to inform policy development and action.
- That resources could be directed towards other priorities, including support for farming communities and mental health initiatives.

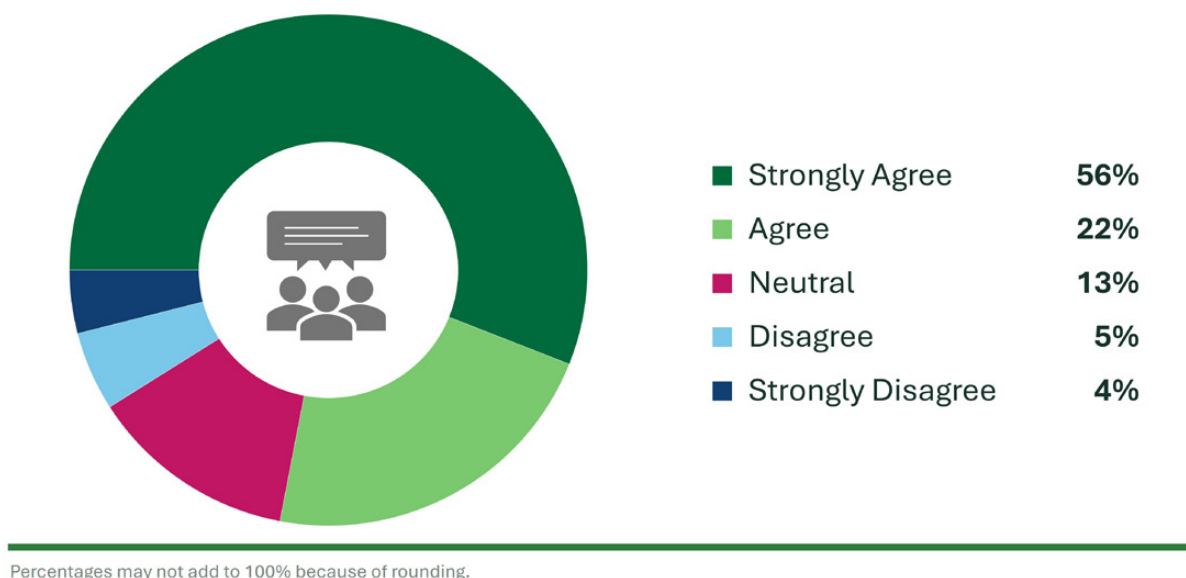


Response to Rural Research and Evidence Model

Question 10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with creation of a Rural Research and Evidence Model?

Of the 121 responses submitted for this question, 78% agreed with the creation of a Rural Research and Evidence Model, with 56% strongly agreeing and 22% agreeing. 9% of respondents disagreed overall, with 5% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were broadly supportive of the creation of a Rural Research and Evidence Model. Respondents highlighted the value of improving access to and coordination of evidence, while stressing that it must be practical and useful.

Figure 27 - Level of Support for the Rural Research & Evidence Model

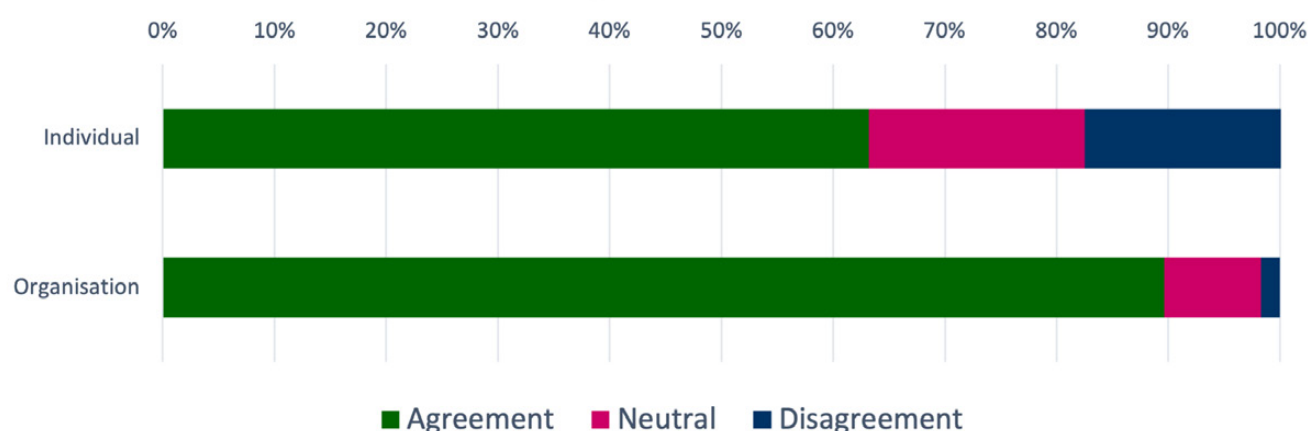


Individual and Organisational Responses

63% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the creation of a Rural Research and Evidence Model, compared with 90% of organisations, while 18% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.



Figure 28 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the free text responses are set out below:

- Respondents supported improving access to data, and sharing knowledge across government, researchers and communities.
- Respondents emphasised that the Rural Research and Evidence Model, and Rural Observatory, would enable more targeted and effective interventions in rural areas.
- Some respondents expressed the opinion that data should be up to date, relevant and easy to use.
- Some respondents suggested that the Rural Research and Evidence Model, and the Rural Observatory, must be populated with the right data and maintained in real time, and not hold outdated information. Some respondents recommended the inclusion of currently available data, rather than creation of new data, and some cited/offered specific sources.
- A significant number of respondents made specific suggestions regarding the composition of the Rural Research and Evidence Model, emphasising the need for a comprehensive evidence base that reflects the diverse characteristics, experiences and challenges of rural areas. Suggested data themes included demographic trends, geography, cross-border activity, access to services, transport and connectivity, economic activity, community capacity, environmental factors, financial inclusion, health and wellbeing, domestic abuse and social issues affecting rural communities.



- Some respondents suggested that the Rural Research and Evidence Model should draw on lived experience, industry evidence and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, to strengthen the evidence base. Respondents highlighted the importance of proportionate and transparent data collection, together with the use of benchmarking tools and shared approaches for measuring return on investment.
- Respondents called for the publication of outputs associated with the Rural Research and Evidence Model, including the Rural Observatory and Rural Strategy, to support transparency, accessibility and wider use of the evidence gathered.

In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Concerns about cost.
- Doubts about whether a new Rural Research and Evidence Model is needed if existing data is not fully utilised.
- Ensuring data collected is not later used for unrelated regulatory, enforcement, or compliance purposes.
- There were some concerns expressed about duplication, and the risk of creating unnecessary complexity.

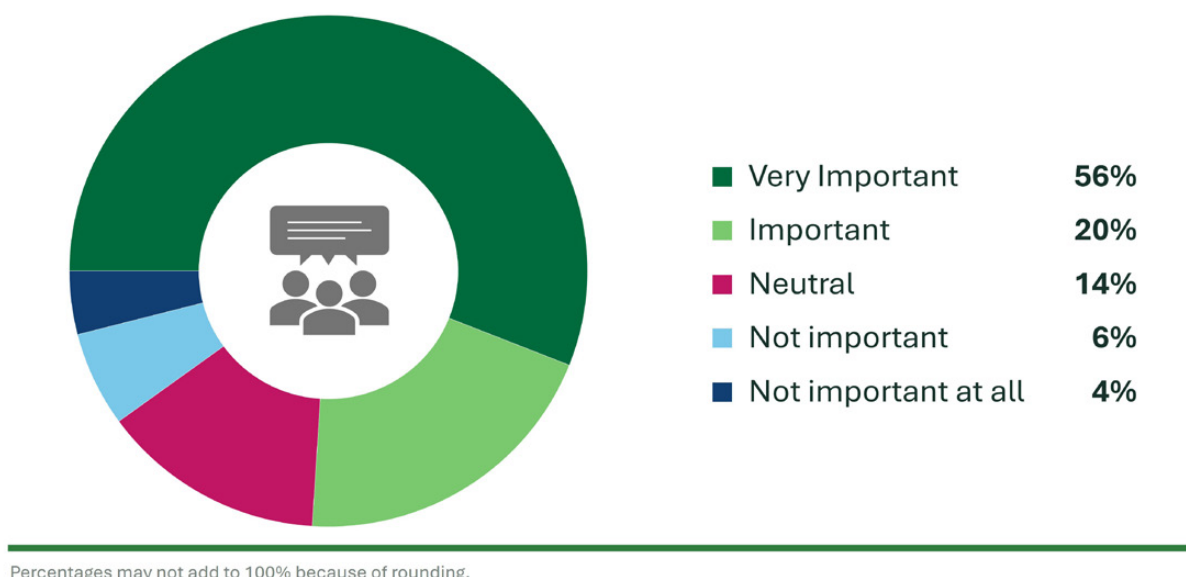


Response to a Rural Typology

Question 11. How important or unimportant do you think it is to develop a rural typology for Northern Ireland?

Of the 118 responses submitted for this question, 76% agreed that it is important to develop a rural typology for Northern Ireland, with 56% considering this very important and 20% important. 10% of respondents considered it unimportant, with 6% not important and 4% not important at all. Responses to this question showed strong support for developing a rural typology, with respondents frequently highlighting that the current NISRA urban-rural classification⁵ is insufficient for policy purposes as it fails to distinguish between the diverse characteristics and needs of different rural communities across Northern Ireland.

Figure 29 - Level of Support for the Rural Typology



Individual and Organisational Responses

58% of individuals considered developing a rural typology for Northern Ireland important (very important and important), compared with 92% of organisations, while 19% of individuals considered it unimportant (not important and not important at all) compared with 2% of organisations.

⁵ [Urban - Rural Classification](#) | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency



Figure 30 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points raised from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents agreed that rural areas differ and should be recognised as such.
- Respondents expressed the opinion that a rural typology would be helpful for better planning, targeting support and improving services.
- Respondents emphasised that the rural typology should be practical and used to inform decisions.
- Respondents made suggestions as to what a rural typology should capture, to be reflective of differences across rural areas. Examples include, population profile, geography, access to services, employment characteristics, car ownership, proximity to transport, digital connectivity, access to natural space, and local circumstances.
- Some respondents suggested that a rural typology should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative insight from lived experience.
- Some respondents stressed a rural typology should be flexible and capable of reflecting the varied characteristics of rural areas, while others raised concerns about the use of different definitions of 'rural'.



In addition, respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Taking learning from other jurisdictions who have developed a similar approach.
- Concerns about an artificial rural typology and potential negative impacts on current activities which span local council boundaries.
- The view that local circumstances are more important than broad categories.
- Concerns about allocation of resource to developing a rural typology.



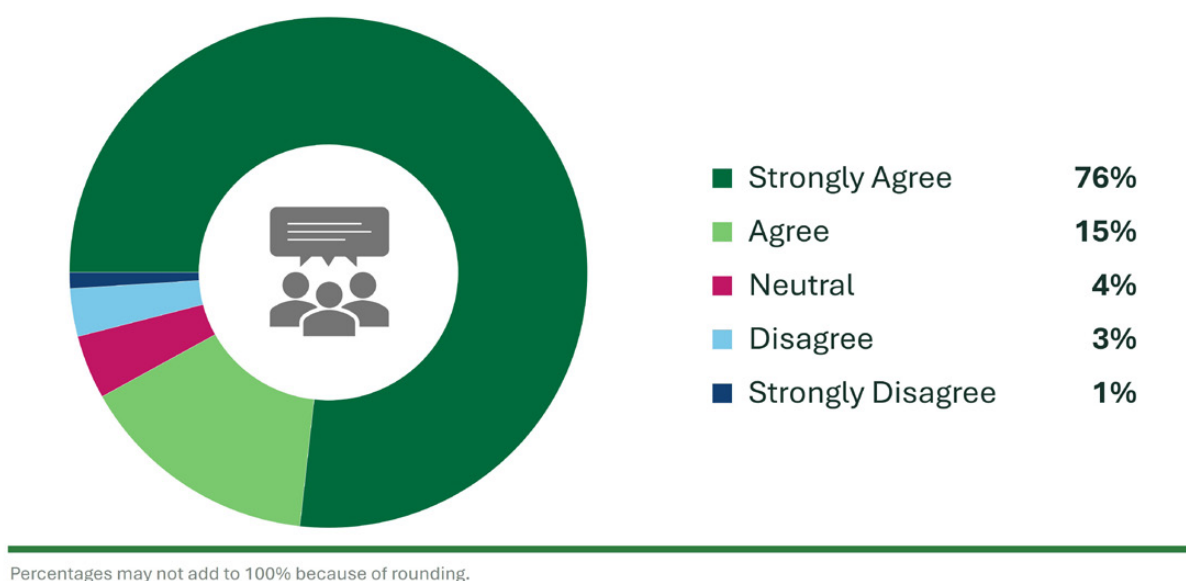
Proposal 4: Strengthening Rural Communities at Local and Regional Level

Response to Long-Term Investment in Voluntary and Community Groups

Question 12. Do you agree or disagree that long-term investment in voluntary and community groups will help ensure diverse rural voices are heard?

Of the 118 responses submitted for this question, 91% agreed with long-term investment in voluntary and community groups, with 76% strongly agreeing and 15% agreeing. 4% of respondents disagreed overall, with 3% disagreeing and 1% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question showed very strong support for long-term investment in voluntary and community groups. Respondents highlighted the important role these groups play in supporting rural communities.

Figure 31 - Level of Support for Long-Term Voluntary and Community Investment

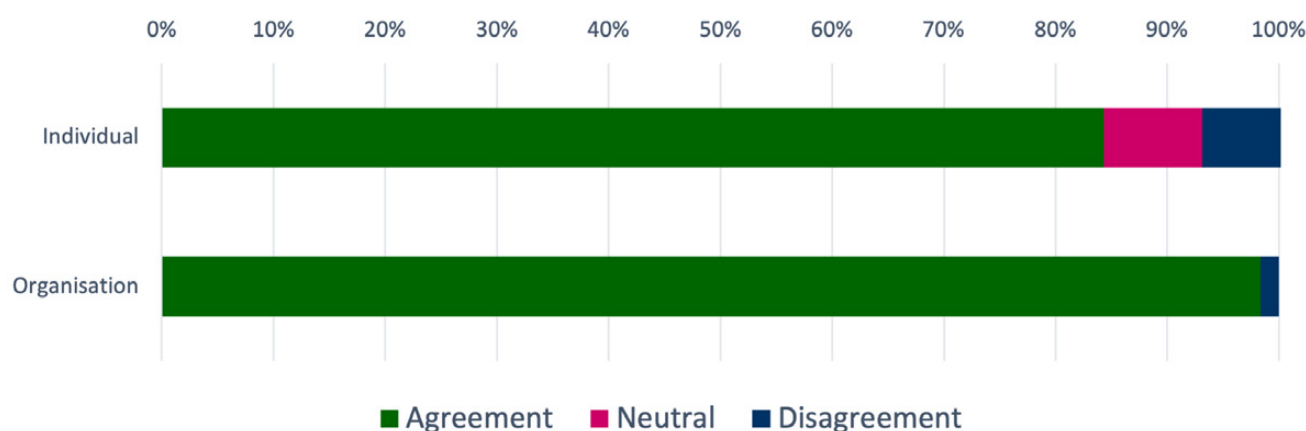


Individual and Organisational Responses

84% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with long-term investment in voluntary and community groups will help ensure diverse rural voices are heard, compared with 98% of organisations, while 7% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.



Figure 32 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations



Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the free text responses are set out below

- There was significant support for the proposal, with respondents highlighting the importance of supporting regional and local voluntary and community groups to strengthen their capacity and long-term sustainability, in line with the Fair Funding Principles cited in the Partnership Agreement between government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (July 2025).
- Suggestions included support for governance, staffing, shared administrative services, and the provision of funded rural development officers.
- Several respondents emphasised the need for assistance with core and running costs, including insurance and digital systems.
- Respondents highlighted the importance of recruiting, training, supporting and retaining volunteers.
- Some respondents called for investment in community infrastructure, such as halls and community facilities.
- Suggestions were made for enhanced advocacy and advisory support.
- Respondents highlighted the value of stronger engagement and collaboration between voluntary and community groups and businesses.



In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Funding for voluntary and community groups should be balanced alongside wider rural priorities, including transport, infrastructure and agriculture.
- The need to ensure fair distribution of support between voluntary and community groups.
- The need to strengthen rural capacity whilst avoiding duplication of existing structures.



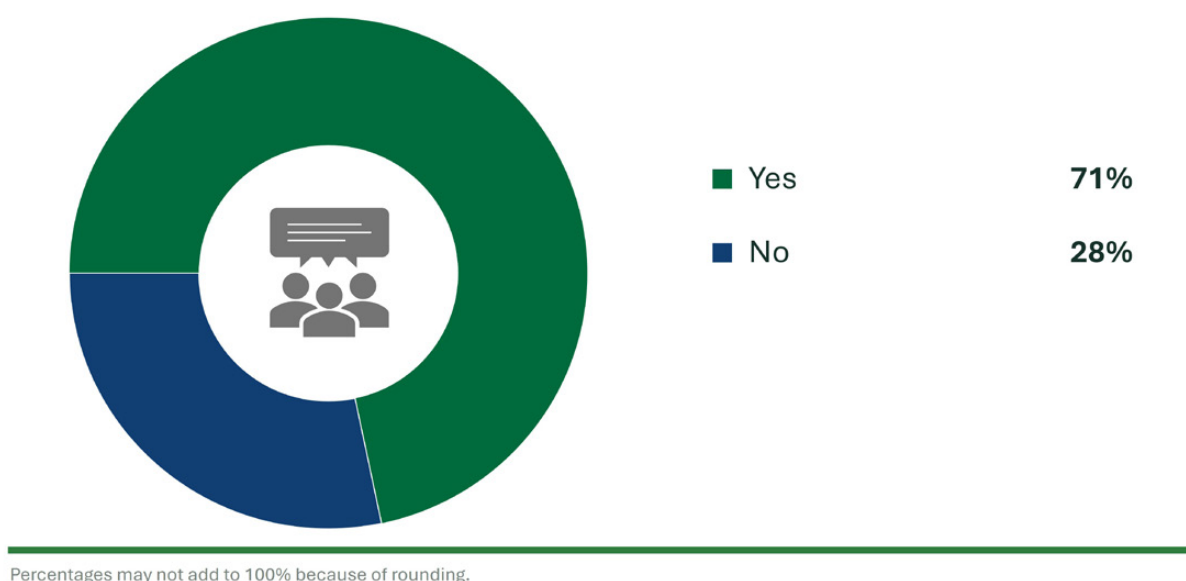
Proposal 5: Reviewing the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Response to Awareness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Question 13. Are you aware of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016?

Of the 120 responses submitted for this question, 71% were aware of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. 28% of respondents were not aware of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

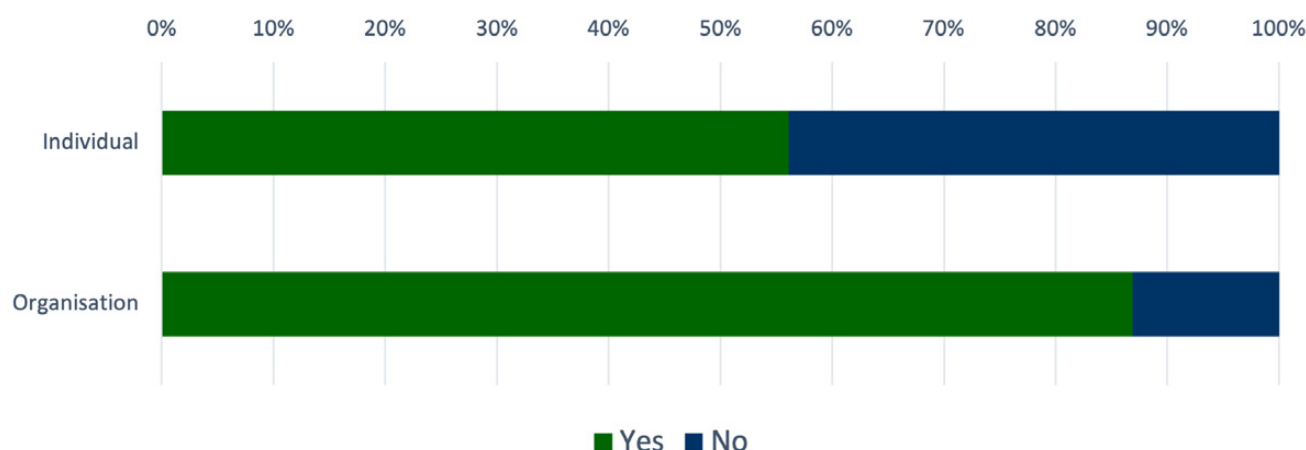
Figure 33 - Awareness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016



Individual and Organisational Responses

56% of individuals answered 'Yes' to awareness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, compared with 87% of organisations, while 44% of individuals answered 'No' compared with 13% of organisations.

Figure 34 - Awareness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016



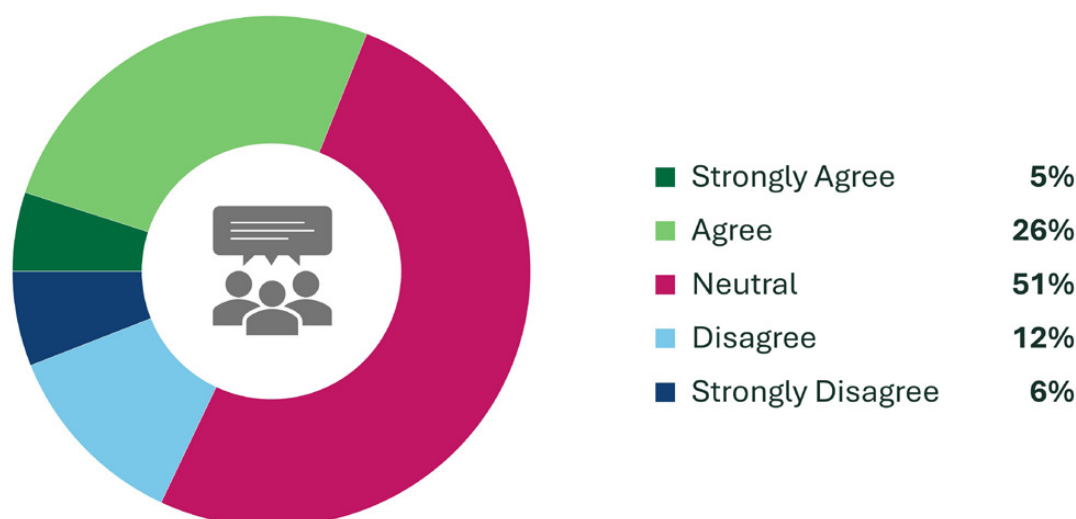


Response to the Impact of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Question 14. Do you agree or disagree that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has made a positive difference to rural communities?

Of the 112 responses submitted for this question, 31% agreed that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has made a positive difference to rural communities, with 5% strongly agreeing and 26% agreeing. 18% of respondents disagreed overall, with 12% disagreeing and 6% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were mixed, with many respondents acknowledging that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has helped raise awareness of rural issues, while also questioning its overall impact in practice. A recurring theme was that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 is often viewed as a procedural or 'tick-box' exercise, with limited influence on decision-making.

Figure 35 - Level of Agreement that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has made a positive difference



Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Individual and Organisational Responses

18% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with whether the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has made a positive difference to rural communities, compared with 46% of organisations, while 19% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 16% of organisations.



Figure 36 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents recognised that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has increased awareness and consideration of rural issues across government and public authorities and provided examples of where it had helped highlight rural concerns.
- Many respondents felt that the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 has not consistently translated into meaningful action, improved decision-making, or measurable outcomes for rural communities.
- A common concern was that RNIAs are often treated as a 'tick-box exercise', with conclusions of limited or no impact sometimes perceived to be unsupported by sufficient evidence.
- Respondents highlighted weaknesses in implementation, monitoring and enforcement, and noted that consideration of rural needs does not always result in action to address them.
- Several respondents pointed to inconsistent application of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 across public authorities, leading to variable outcomes.
- There were calls for stronger accountability mechanisms, improved evidence gathering, enhanced monitoring arrangements, and clearer measurement of outcomes to strengthen the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.
- Some respondents suggested that closer alignment between the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the proposed Rural Policy could help maximise its impact and support more consistent delivery of positive outcomes for rural communities.

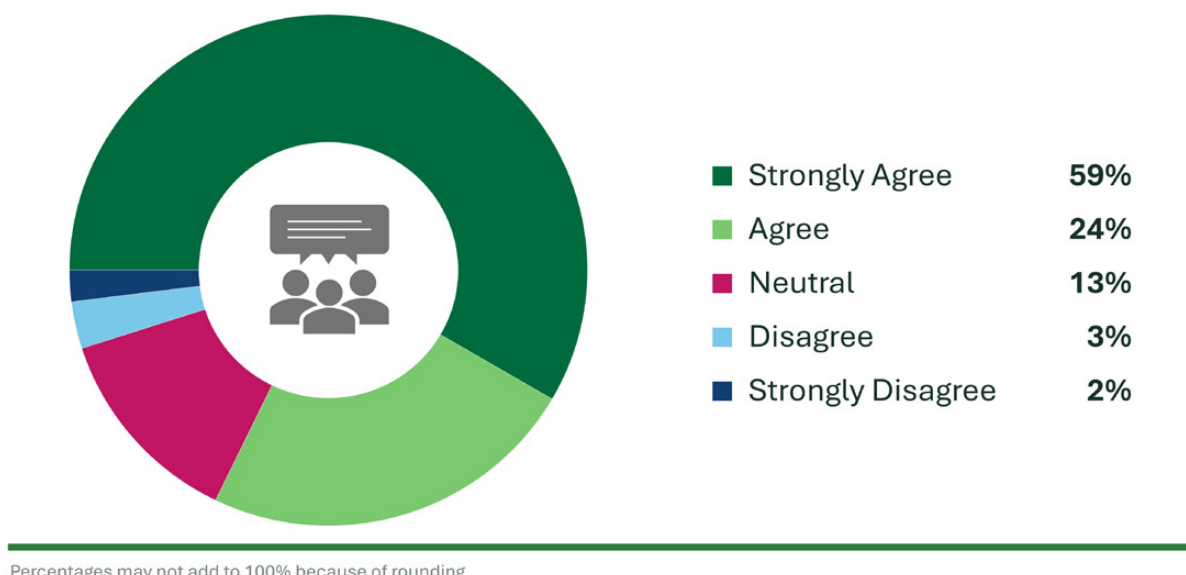


Response to a Review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Question 15. Do you agree or disagree that a review of the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 should be carried out?

Of the 121 responses submitted for this question, 83% agreed that a review of the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 should be carried out, with 59% strongly agreeing and 24% agreeing. 5% of respondents disagreed overall, with 3% disagreeing and 2% strongly disagreeing. Responses showed strong support for a review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, with many respondents linking this directly to concerns raised about its current effectiveness. The feedback suggests that respondents view a review as necessary to strengthen how the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 operates in practice.

Figure 37 - Level of Support for a Review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016



Individual and Organisational Responses

72% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that a review of the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 should be carried out, compared with 91% of organisations, while 7% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 2% of organisations.



Figure 38 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the written comments are set out below:

- There was strong support for a review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, with some respondents suggesting that additional public bodies should be brought within its scope.
- While respondents highlighted examples of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 helping to embed consideration of rural needs in policy development and service delivery, many considered that its effectiveness could be strengthened.
- Respondents emphasised the need to improve the quality and consistency of RNIAs, including stronger use of evidence, improved monitoring and reporting, greater cross-departmental coordination, and ensuring assessments lead to meaningful action.
- Many respondents supported strengthening the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 rather than changing its underlying principles.
- Respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 delivers measurable outcomes for rural communities and is applied consistently across public authorities and government departments.
- While some respondents viewed improved implementation as the priority, others considered that the review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 should also examine broader legislative and structural issues.



In addition, some respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- Concerns that the review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 could be too narrowly focused on guidance and implementation issues.
- Suggestions to strengthen the statutory requirements of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, enhance independent scrutiny and accountability, introduce formal complaints mechanisms, and improve reporting, monitoring and compliance arrangements.



Policy Priorities

Response to Policy Priorities

Question 16. What do you believe should be the top priorities for this proposed policy?

A total of 126 responses were received to this free text question, focusing on current issues affecting rural areas. Overall, responses emphasised practical priorities, particularly transport and accessibility, funding and investment, and the need for stronger cross government coordination.

- **Improving access to services and infrastructure**
Approximately two-thirds (65%)⁶ of responses identified access to services and infrastructure as a priority. Respondents highlighted the need for improved access to healthcare, transport, broadband, education and local facilities, with transport and digital connectivity frequently cited as key barriers to rural life.
- **Supporting voluntary and community groups**
Just over half of responses (55%) highlighted the importance of supporting voluntary and community groups. Many commented that voluntary and community groups require sustainable, multi-year funding and less administrative burden, as they are delivering services and supporting rural communities directly.
- **Addressing housing and population retention**
Approximately 40% of responses identified housing and population retention as a priority. Respondents stated that affordable housing, planning and measures to retain children and young people, and families, in rural areas should be prioritised to support long-term sustainability.
- **Supporting the rural economy, farming and local businesses**
Just over a third of responses (35%) identified support for the rural economy, farming and local businesses as a priority. Respondents highlighted the need to support agriculture, rural businesses, food production and job creation, with a focus on sustaining viable rural livelihoods.
- **Improving coordination, delivery and local decision-making**
Just under a third (30%) of responses identified coordination, delivery and local decision-making as a priority. Respondents highlighted that the policy should be delivered through stronger collaboration across government, with councils, more localised and place-based approaches, and clearer accountability, with less bureaucracy and more focus on practical outcomes.
- Respondents also provided practical ways to address these priorities, including improvements to transport, healthcare access, broadband and infrastructure, as well as support for farming, rural businesses, housing and community development.

⁶ Percentages do not add up to 100% as responses often identified more than one priority, so a single response may be counted under multiple themes.



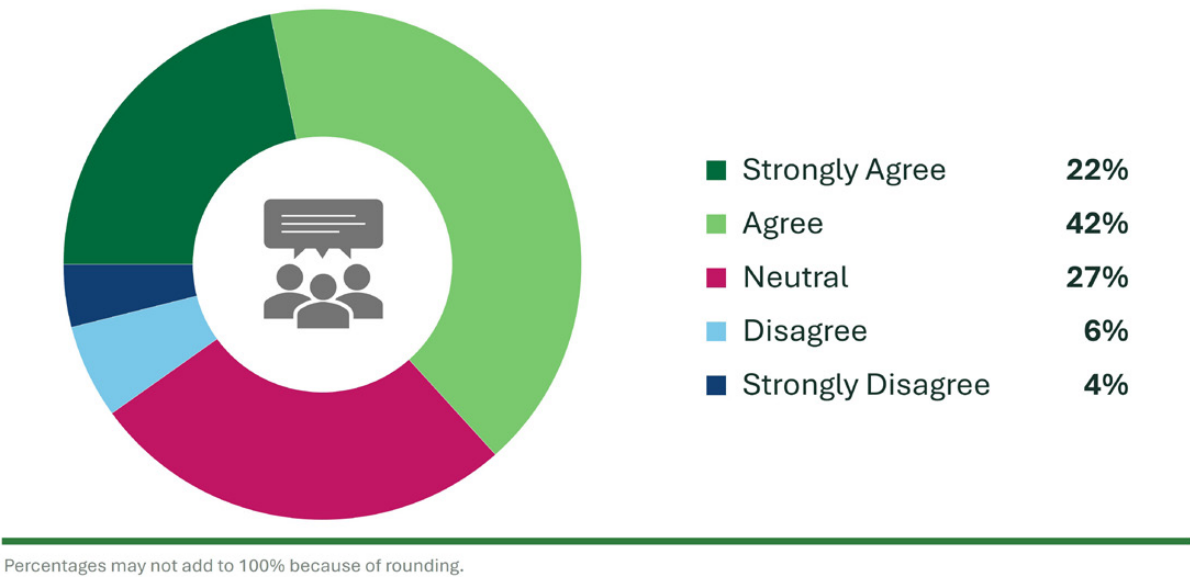
Impact Assessments

Response to Rural Needs Impact Assessment

Question 17. Do you agree or disagree with the conclusions of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA)?

Of the 105 responses submitted for this question, 64% agreed with the conclusions of the RNIA, with 22% strongly agreeing and 42% agreeing. 10% of respondents disagreed, with 6% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were mixed but generally positive, with many respondents accepting the overall conclusions while raising concerns about the depth and practical application of the assessment. A recurring theme was that, while the RNIA identifies key rural issues, it does not fully capture the complexity or translate clearly into tangible outcomes.

Figure 39 - Level of Support for Conclusions of the RNIA



Individual and Organisational Responses

51% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the conclusions of the RNIA, compared with 79% of organisations, while 11% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 8% of organisations.



Figure 40 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the written comments are set out below:

- The majority of respondents broadly accepted the RNIA conclusions at a high level.
- Several respondents stated that the RNIA lacked sufficient detail and granularity.
- Respondents raised concerns that some issues, including health, transport, sustainability and local realities, were not fully reflected in the RNIA.
- Some respondents felt that the extent of rural disadvantage and the challenges faced by rural communities were understated in the RNIA.
- There were calls for stronger evidence, greater use of local data, and clearer links between the RNIA findings and how identified issues and opportunities will be addressed in practice.
- A number of respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that the conclusions of the RNIA are linked to specific actions and measurable improvements.

In addition, respondents provided comments and suggestions around:

- The need for more detailed RNIA and recognition of the range of challenges facing rural communities.
- Improving the link between RNIA findings, proposed actions, and measurable outcomes.

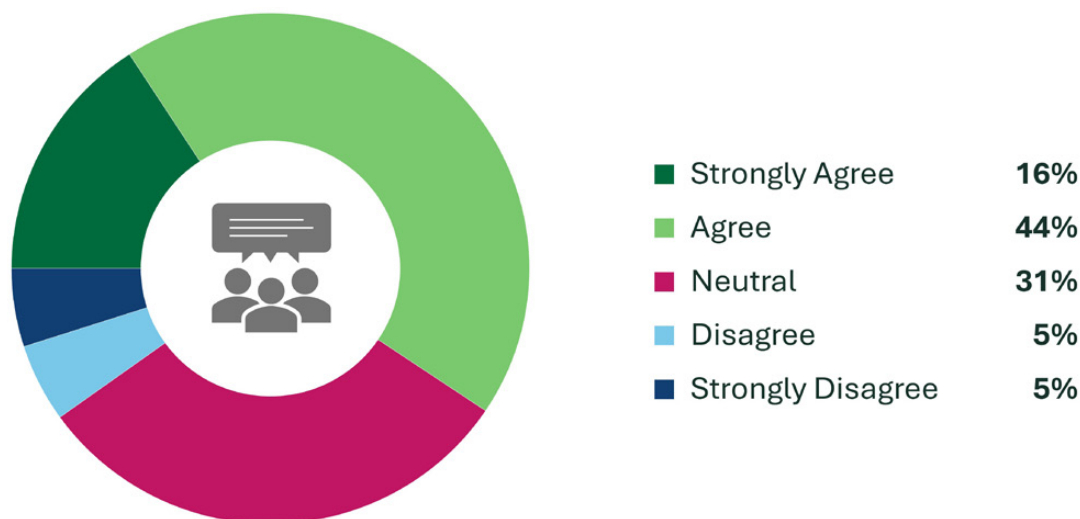


Response to Equality Impact Assessment

Question 18. Do you agree or disagree with the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)?

Of the 105 responses submitted for this question, 60% agreed with the findings of the EQIA, with 16% strongly agreeing and 44% agreeing. 10% of respondents disagreed overall, with 5% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. Responses to this question were broadly supportive but cautious, with many respondents agreeing with the findings while highlighting gaps in how rural-specific equality issues were addressed. A common theme was that the EQIA provides a useful overall framework but requires stronger recognition of how rural equality issues interact with rural disadvantage.

Figure 41 - Level of Support for Conclusions of the EQIA



Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Individual and Organisational Responses

46% of individuals agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) with the findings of the EQIA, compared with 77% of organisations, while 12% of individuals disagreed (strongly disagreed and disagreed) compared with 6% of organisations.



Figure 42 - Level of Support from Individuals and Organisations

Summary of Written Comments

The key points from the written comments are set out below:

- Respondents generally accepted the EQIA findings and overall approach.
- Many respondents identified gaps in the treatment of rural-specific inequality and hidden disadvantage within the EQIA.
- There were concerns that transport and access barriers were not fully addressed within the EQIA.
- Respondents highlighted the experiences of older people, disabled people and young people in rural areas to be better reflected.
- There were calls for more detail on how equality issues combine with rural disadvantage in practice.



Kells Village, County Antrim

6. What Next?

Following consideration of this report, the draft policy will be reviewed to reflect the feedback received, including comments on the Vision, Aim, Objectives, Guiding Principles and the five proposals, alongside findings from the associated impact assessments.

The consultation responses will be used to help inform the final policy which will be shared with the Minister and the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration.

The Department will publish a final policy document along with an associated action plan.



Mournes, County Down

7. Annexes

Annex A: List of Public Consultation Engagement Events

Event Location	Date
Enniskillen, South-West College	Tuesday 24 March 2026
Online Event	Wednesday 25 March 2026
Omagh, Strule Arts Centre	Monday 30 March 2026
Bangor, Carnegie Library	Friday 17 April 2026
Armagh, Southern Regional College	Monday, 20 April 2026
Ballyclare, Town Hall	Tuesday 21 April 2026
Ballymena, Braid Theatre	Wednesday 22 April 2026
Strabane, Enterprise Centre	Monday 27 April 2026
Limavady, Roe Valley Culture and Arts Centre	Tuesday 28 April 2026
Lisburn, Lagan Valley Island	Thursday 07 May 2026
Newry, Altnaveigh House	Friday 08 May 2026
Cookstown, The Burnavon	Tuesday 12 May 2026
Online Event	Monday 18 May 2026



Annex B: List of Organisational Respondents

Responding Organisations (Written Submissions)
Save our Acute Services
Leader Principles - Grow the Glens
Derry City and Strabane Council
Sandycove Holiday Homes
Community Transport Association
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council
South Antrim Community Transport
Marie Curie
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
Law Society NI
Irish League of Credit Unions
Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Rural Housing
Omagh Forum for Rural Associations
Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network
Community Organisations of South Tyrone & Areas
Consumer Council for Northern Ireland
Mid Ulster District Council
Northern Area Community Network
Ulster GAA
Rural Action
TADA Rural Support Network
The Fermanagh Trust
The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Tyrone GAA

Responding Organisations (Citizen Space Submissions)
Ballygrainey Community Hall Committee
Ballygrainey Community Hub
The Heritage Hub Management Committee
Rural Health Partnership
Ballygrainey Rural Community Group
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Cushendall Development Group / Grow the Glens
The Katie Trust
Portavogie Parent Teacher Association
Roe Valley Ancestral Researchers
North Down & Ards Women's Aid
O'Neill's GFC An Port Mór
An Droim Mór Naomh Damhnait
Holiday and Residential Parks Association
John Mitchel's GAC Claudy
Ulster University Business School
Ards and North Down Borough Council (Draft Response)
Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster
Derrygonnelly Harps GFC
Derrylin O'Connell's GFC
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Newtownbutler Men's / Community Shed
Countryside Alliance Ireland
Youth Action NI



Responding Organisations (Written Submissions)

RAPID, The Rural Area Partnership in Derry Ltd

Office of the Commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and Ulster-British Tradition

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council

DfE Skills and Education Group

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

CDM Community Transport

Ulster Farmers' Union

Fermanagh Community Transport

County Down Rural Community Network

The Women's Resource and Development Agency

Centre for Cross Border Co-Operation

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association

Tourism NI

National Trust

Sinn Féin

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation

Libraries NI

Outscape

Fermanagh Rural Community Network

The Nature Friendly Farming Network

Areas of Research Interest (RCN Views)

Responding Organisations (Citizen Space Submissions)

Keady & District Angling Club

The Antrim Down and Armagh Rural Support Network

Royal Town Planning Institute

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Naomh Aodhán Hurling Club

Age NI

Ederney, St Joseph's GAA

Live Here Love Here (Formerly Keep NI Beautiful)

Devenish St. Mary's GAA

Brookeborough Heber MacMahon's GFC



Annex C: Breakdown of Responses Across Individuals and Organisations

Question	Individual Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Organisation Strongly Agree/Very Important	Individual Agree/ Important	Organisation Agree/ Important	Individual Disagree/Not Important	Organisation Disagree/Not Important	Individual Strongly Disagree/Not Important at all	Organisation Strongly Disagree/Not important at all
Q1: Vision	47%	52%	23%	44%	5%	2%	12%	0%
Q2: Aim	46%	51%	21%	43%	7%	2%	11%	0%
Q3: Objectives	39%	46%	26%	41%	9%	1%	12%	0%
Q4: Principles	39%	52%	35%	44%	4%	1%	11%	0%
Q5: Rural Champions Model	53%	48%	18%	42%	7%	6%	14%	0%
Q6: DAERA Rural Collaboration Fund	40%	57%	18%	30%	14%	0%	11%	0%
Q7: Local Councils & Northern Ireland Executive working together	67%	90%	19%	8%	2%	0%	4%	0%
Q8: DAERA Enabling Rural Fund	47%	68%	26%	22%	9%	2%	4%	0%
Q9: Rural Baseline Study	54%	79%	18%	18%	12%	0%	7%	0%
Q10: Rural Research & Evidence Model	40%	70%	23%	20%	9%	2%	9%	0%



Question	Individual Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Organisation Strongly Agree/Very Important	Individual Agree/ Important	Organisation Agree/ Important	Individual Disagree/Not Important	Organisation Disagree/Not Important	Individual Strongly Disagree/Not Important at all	Organisation Strongly Disagree/Not important at all
Q11: Rural Typology	40%	71%	18%	21%	11%	2%	9%	0%
Q12: Long term Investment in Voluntary and Community Groups	63%	89%	21%	10%	5%	2%	2%	0%
Q14: Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 positive difference	2%	9%	16%	36%	11%	13%	9%	4%
Q15: Review of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 should be carried out	49%	67%	23%	25%	4%	2%	4%	0%
Q17: RNIA	23%	21%	28%	58%	4%	8%	7%	0%
Q18: EQIA	18%	15%	28%	63%	4%	6%	9%	0%

Note: Response categories reflect the five-point scale used for each question, either from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree or from Very Important to Not Important at All. Questions 13 and 16 are not included, as these questions did not use the five-point response scale.

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.



Annex D: Levels of Support Across all Respondents

	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Vision, Aim, Objectives and Key Principles	Q1	50%	34%	7%	3%	6%
	Q2	48%	33%	10%	4%	5%
	Q3	43%	34%	13%	5%	6%
	Q4	46%	40%	7%	2%	5%
Proposal 1: Putting Rural Voices at the Heart of Government	Q5	50%	30%	7%	7%	7%
	Q6	49%	24%	15%	7%	5%
Proposal 2: Local Partnerships for Local Impact	Q7	79%	14%	5%	1%	2%
	Q8	58%	24%	11%	5%	2%
Proposal 3: Understanding Rural	Q9	67%	18%	6%	6%	3%
	Q10	56%	22%	13%	5%	4%
	Q11	56%	20%	14%	6%	4%
Proposal 4: Strengthening Rural Communities at Local and Regional Level	Q12	76%	15%	4%	3%	1%
Proposal 5: Reviewing the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016	Q13	-	-	-	-	-
	Q14	5%	26%	51%	12%	6%
	Q15	59%	24%	13%	3%	2%



	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Impact Assessments	Q16	-	-	-	-	-
	Q17	22%	42%	27%	6%	4%
	Q18	16%	44%	31%	5%	5%

Note: Response categories reflect the five-point scale used for each question, either from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree or from Very Important to Not Important at All. Questions 13 and 16 are not included, as these questions did not use the five-point response scale.

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.



Annex E: Levels of Support Among Individual Respondents

	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Vision, Aim, Objectives and Key Principles	Q1	47%	23%	12%	5%	12%
	Q2	46%	21%	16%	7%	11%
	Q3	39%	26%	14%	9%	12%
	Q4	39%	35%	12%	4%	11%
Proposal 1: Putting Rural Voices at the Heart of Government	Q5	53%	18%	9%	7%	14%
	Q6	40%	18%	18%	14%	11%
Proposal 2: Local Partnerships for Local Impact	Q7	67%	19%	9%	2%	4%
	Q8	47%	26%	14%	9%	4%
Proposal 3: Understanding Rural	Q9	54%	18%	9%	12%	7%
	Q10	40%	23%	19%	9%	9%
	Q11	40%	18%	23%	11%	9%
Proposal 4: Strengthening Rural Communities at Local and Regional Level	Q12	63%	21%	9%	5%	2%
Proposal 5: Reviewing the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016	Q13	-	-	-	-	-
	Q14	2%	16%	63%	11%	9%
	Q15	49%	23%	21%	4%	4%



	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Impact Assessments	Q16	-	-	-	-	-
	Q17	23%	28%	39%	4%	7%
	Q18	18%	28%	42%	4%	9%

Note: Response categories reflect the five-point scale used for each question, either from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree or from Very Important to Not Important at All. Questions 13 and 16 are not included, as these questions did not use the five-point response scale.

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.



Annex F: Levels of Support Among Organisational Respondents

	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Vision, Aim, Objectives and Key Principles	Q1	52%	44%	3%	2%	0%
	Q2	51%	43%	5%	2%	0%
	Q3	46%	41%	12%	1%	0%
	Q4	52%	44%	3%	1%	0%
Proposal 1: Putting Rural Voices at the Heart of Government	Q5	48%	42%	5%	6%	0%
	Q6	57%	30%	13%	0%	0%
Proposal 2: Local Partnerships for Local Impact	Q7	90%	8%	2%	0%	0%
	Q8	68%	22%	8%	2%	0%
Proposal 3: Understanding Rural	Q9	79%	18%	3%	0%	0%
	Q10	70%	20%	8%	2%	0%
	Q11	71%	21%	7%	2%	0%
Proposal 4: Strengthening Rural Communities at Local and Regional Level	Q12	89%	10%	0%	2%	0%
Proposal 5: Reviewing the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016	Q13	-	-	-	-	-
	Q14	9%	36%	38%	13%	4%
	Q15	67%	25%	6%	2%	0%



	Question	Strongly Agree/ Very Important	Agree/ Important	Neutral	Disagree/ Not Important	Strongly Disagree/ Not Important at all
Impact Assessments	Q16	-	-	-	-	-
	Q17	21%	58%	13%	8%	0%
	Q18	15%	63%	17%	6%	0%

Note: Response categories reflect the five-point scale used for each question, either from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree or from Very Important to Not Important at All. Questions 13 and 16 are not included, as these questions did not use the five-point response scale.

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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