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The Rural Needs Act as a Policy Driver for Rural Proofing in Northern Ireland

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ERCA Café event 26th June 2026

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Who we are

- Regional, membership-based organisation.
- Supporting rural communities across Northern Ireland
- Building capacity and voice to influence policy
- Focus on poverty, inequality, community development , and good relations

Rural Northern Ireland

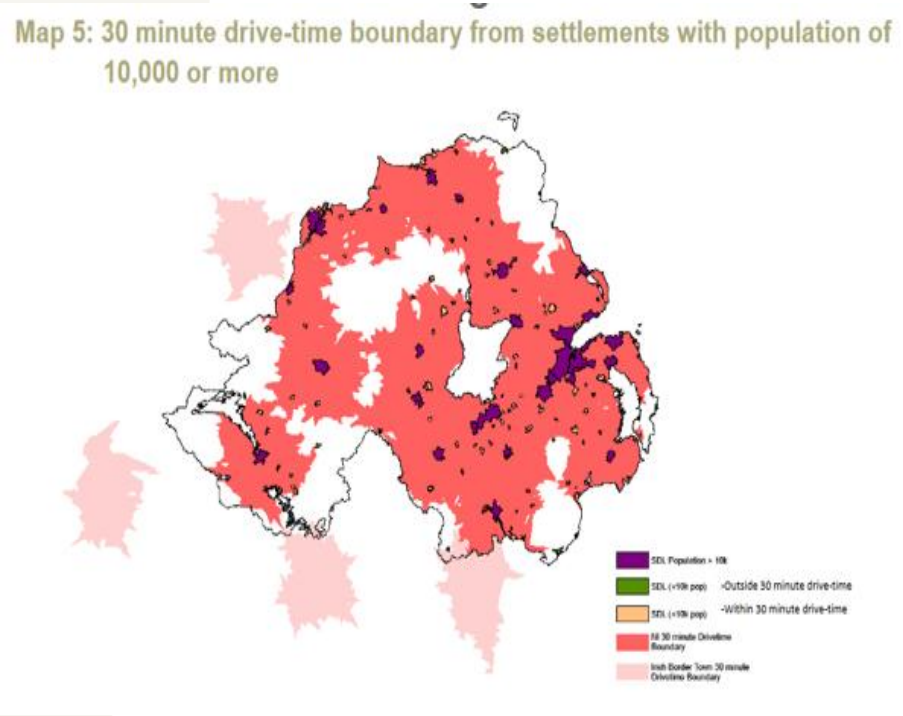
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- 37% of NI's population lives in rural areas

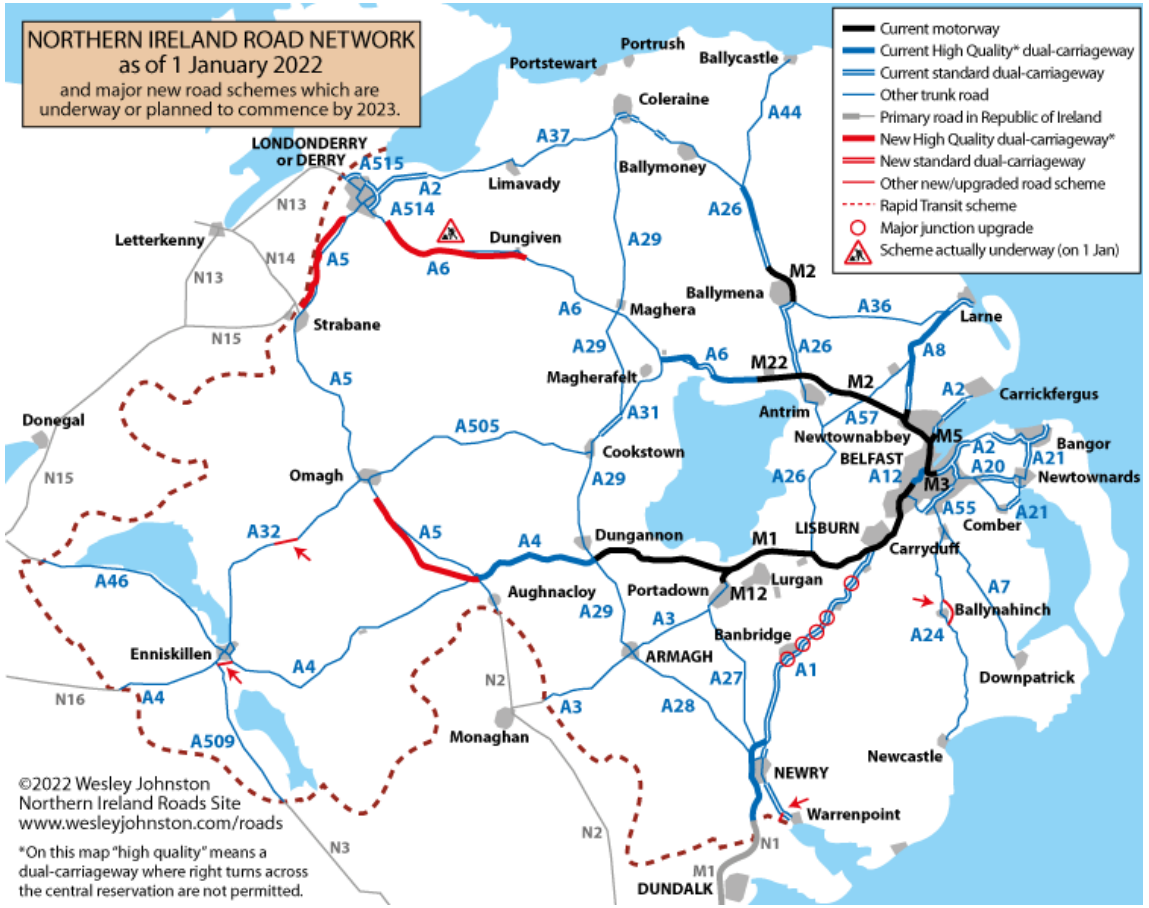
Policy on health, transport, housing, and economy affects a large portion of citizens

- Map: Areas in red = >30 mins from nearest town (10,000+ population)
- Historically, rural needs were an afterthought

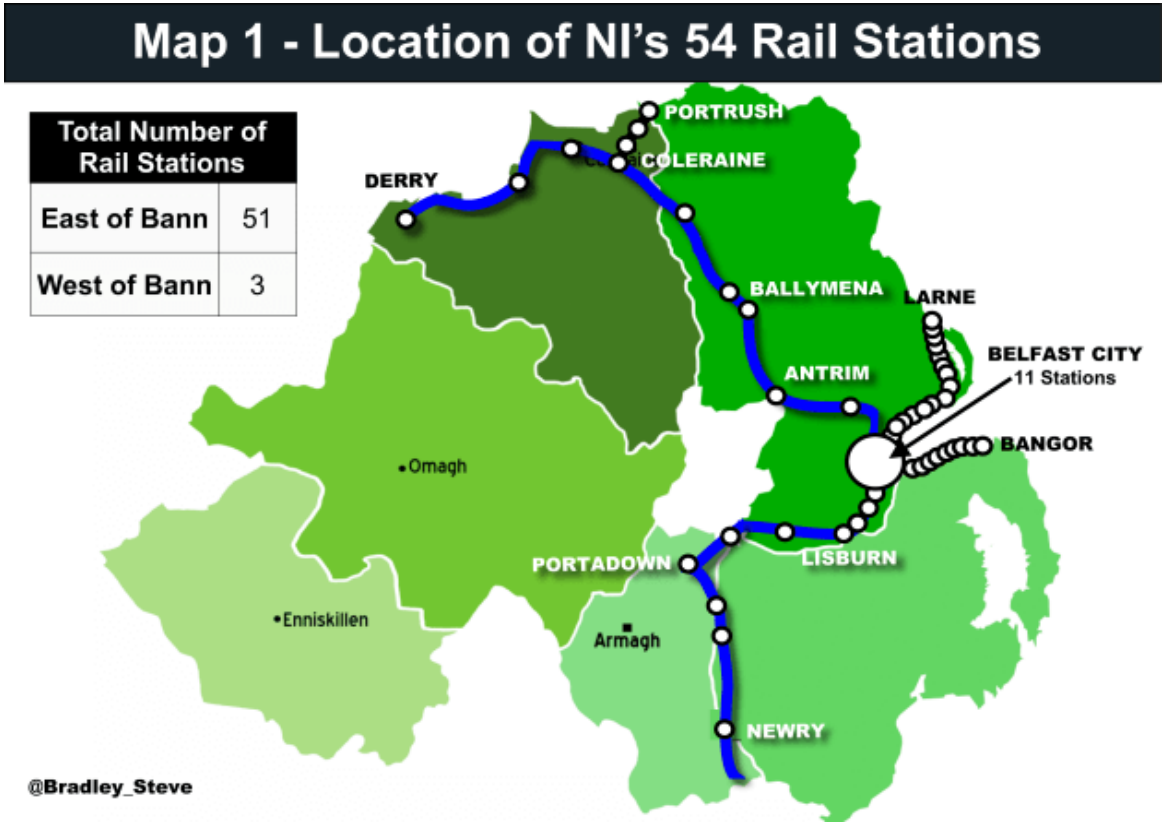
Rural proofing introduced to ensure impact on rural communities is assessed

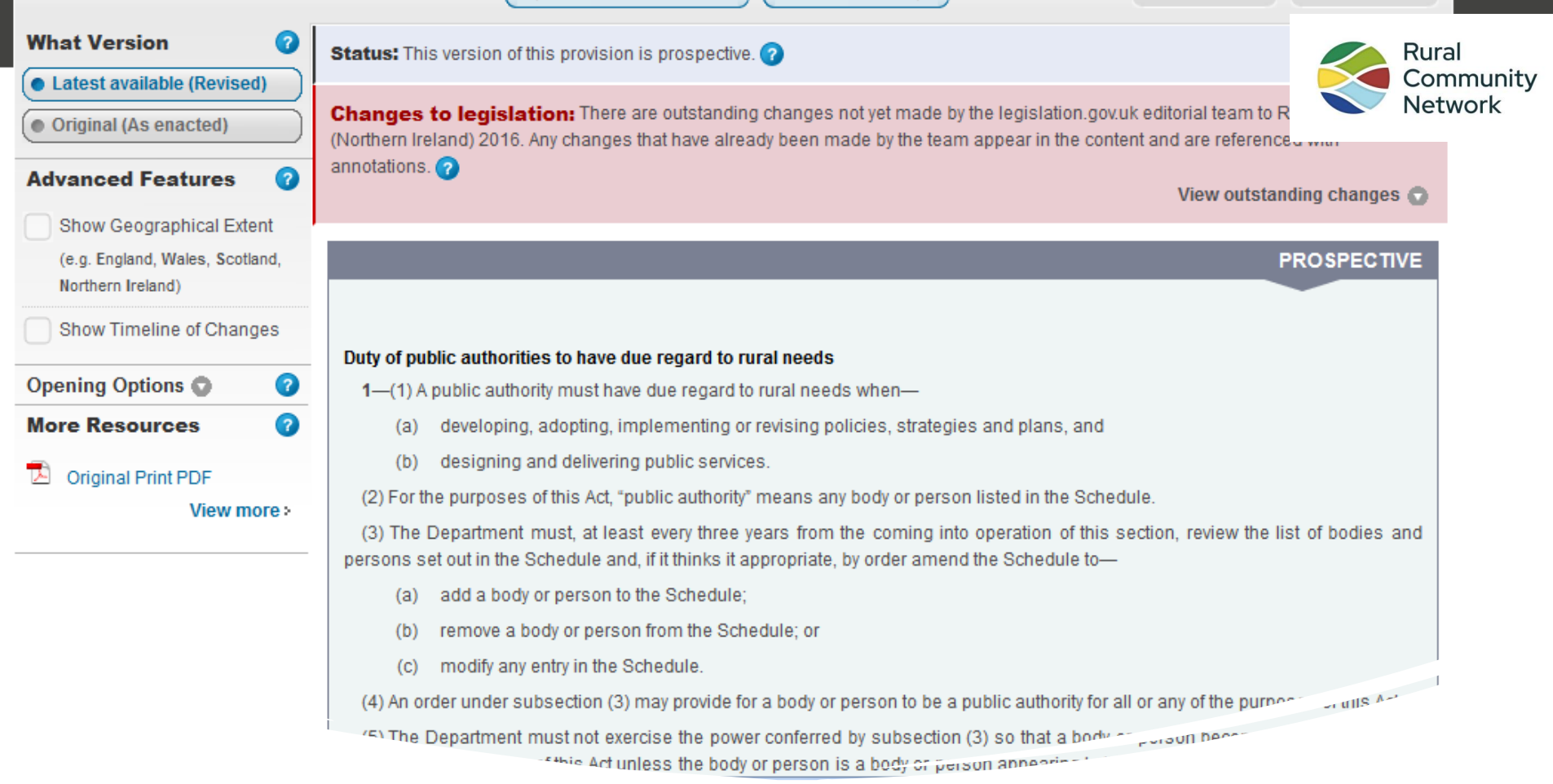


NI Road Network 2022



Rail transport access





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The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

- Passed by the NI Assembly in 2016
- First and only legislation of its kind in the UK or Ireland
- One of few European laws placing rural proofing on a statutory footing
- A significant political achievement

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016



- Result of persistent lobbying by rural organisations

- 2002: rural proofing was voluntary → patchy and inconsistent

- The Act imposes a legal duty on public authorities to have: **“due regard”** to **“rural needs”**

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“Due Regard” Explained



- Means decision-makers must consciously consider rural needs



- Not about guaranteeing outcomes — it’s about showing active consideration



- Origin linked to the Brown principles



- Ensures accountability and transparency in decision-making

“Rural Needs” Defined

- “The social and economic needs of persons in rural areas”

- Rural = settlements with <5,000 people or open countryside

In Practice

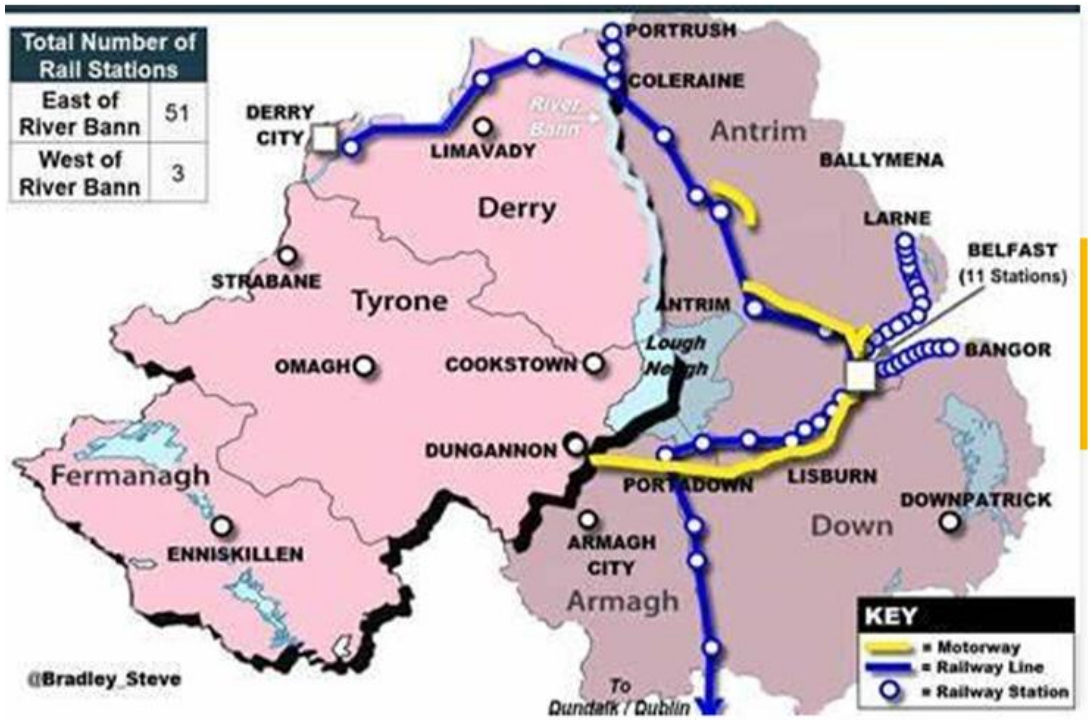
It’s a legal pause before decisions are made to consider:

- How will this affect rural communities?
- Are there unintended consequences?
- Could adjustments improve outcomes for rural areas?

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Rural Diversity

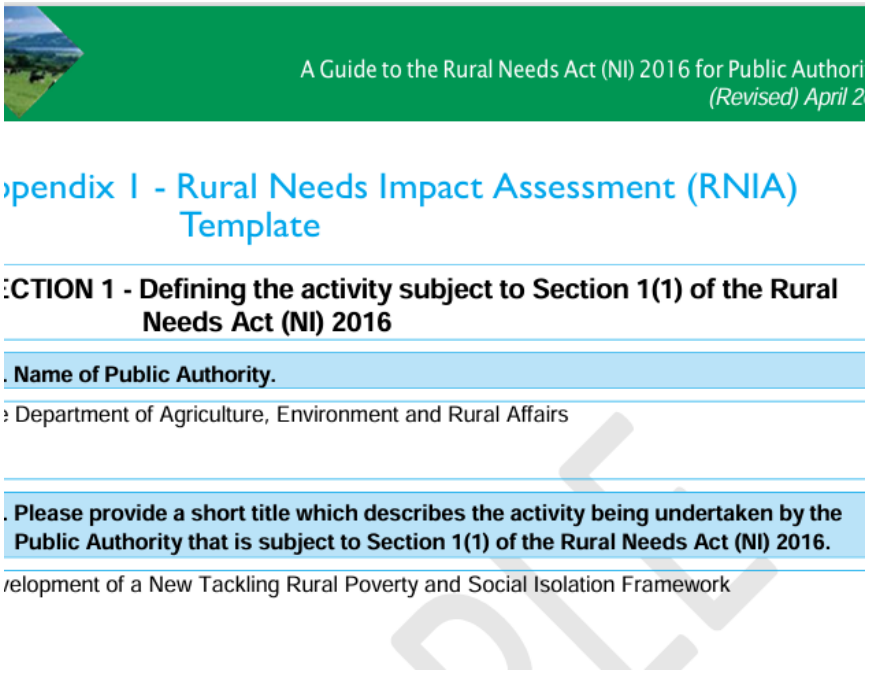


Rural areas are not all the same:

- Mix of: well-connected peri-urban, isolated, and border communities
- Proofing must reflect these typologies for fairness and effectiveness

Why It Works

- Raised awareness across departments and councils
- Reporting duties promote transparency
- Annual Rural Needs Monitoring Report shows steady rise in assessments
- Rural organisations now have a legal platform for advocacy


A Guide to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 for Public Authori
(Revised) April 2

ppendix 1 - Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template

CTION 1 - Defining the activity subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

. Name of Public Authority.

e Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

. Please provide a short title which describes the activity being undertaken by the Public Authority that is subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

velopment of a New Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework

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Limitations and Challenges

- Duty is procedural, not substantive

Procedural = procedure (steps - How)

Substantive = substance (content - What)

- Some departments treat it as a tick-box exercise
- No sanctions or enforcement mechanisms
- Less “bite” than equality legislation



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The First Judicial Review on Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Case: Mid Ulster Council v Department for Communities (2025)

Challenge: 2022/23 Rate Support Grant cut.

No Rural Needs Impact Assessment

Court agreed: Department failed to consider rural impact

Court confirmed public bodies must show:

- A rural needs impact assessment or equivalent
- Evidence of active consideration
- Justification of alignment with rural needs



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The First Judicial Review on Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

Case: **Mid Ulster Council v Department for Communities (2025**)

Outcome:

- Declaration of Unlawfulness
- Confirms duty but offers no remedy, meaning no reversal

Is this a turning point?

RCN has seen greater engagement and accountability



Looking Forward



Positives:

- Raised profile and visibility of rural proofing
- Legal hook for communities to challenge poor policy
- Active areas of work: Anti-Poverty, Health, Pre-School, Social Security, Climate, Transport, Cross-cutting Rural Matter

Negatives:

- Still lacks teeth — needs stronger enforcement and monitoring
- Risk of tokenism without culture change in government

Next Steps:

- Strengthen the Act via clearer guidance, better reporting, or legislative amendments

- The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016: milestone for rural equity in policymaking
- Not perfect but it has shifted the debate

Key takeaway:

It’s not enough to say rural areas matter — we need frameworks, legislation, and sometimes legal pressure to ensure they are truly considered.



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