

Rural Needs Impact Assessment

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

1A. Name of Public Authority.

Department of Education

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

Review of Free School Meals / Uniform Grant Eligibility Criteria

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

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

1D. Please provide the official title (if any) of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service document or initiative relating to the category indicated in Section 1C above.

Review of Free School Meals / Uniform Grant Eligibility Criteria

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

Identify and develop costed options for enabling more pupils to access Free School Meals and Uniform Grants, including but not limited to FSM for some/all pupils and/or by raising the current net household income threshold that applies to those in receipt of Universal Credit.

1F. What definition of 'rural' is the Public Authority using in respect of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?

Population Settlements of less than 5,000 (Default definition).

Other Definition (Provide details and the rationale below).

A definition of 'rural' is not applicable.

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

N/A

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

N/A

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

N/A

SECTION 2 - Understanding the impact of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

2A. Is the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service likely to impact on people in rural areas?

Yes No If the response is **NO** GO TO Section **2E**.

2B. Please explain how the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas.

A number of options have been considered for increasing access to FSM and Uniform Grants, including the provision of universal FSM for some/all year groups and/or by raising the current net household income threshold that applies to those in receipt of Universal Credit to allow more low-income families to access these supports.

As these options would apply to all pupils irrespective of location, more rural pupils would be able to access FSM through each of these options.

Research demonstrates that the provision of nutritious free school meals generates many short- and longer-term benefits. This includes positive impacts on the behavior and concentration of children, on their physical and mental health and on their learning outcomes. This is particularly important for children from the most deprived backgrounds for whom the school meal may be the only meal the child will receive that day.

2C. If the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas, please explain how it is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently.

The 2022/23* School census shows the breakdown of free school meal entitlement by whether a pupil lives in a rural or urban area. 40% of all pupils are rural, 60% are urban. 27% of FSM pupils live in rural areas, 73% in urban areas. 45% of those not entitled to FSM (who therefore could receive universal FSM under some options) live in rural areas, 55% live in urban areas.

Raising the FSM income threshold for those in receipt of Universal Credit

If the income threshold that applies to those applying for FSM on the basis of being in receipt of universal credit were to be raised, it is anticipated that similar proportions would apply to the additional low-income families that would be able to apply for FSM. If FSM entitlement was proportionate across rural and urban dwellers, 40% of all FSM pupils would live in rural areas. However, as this figure is 27%, it would indicate that additional FSM entitlement due to a rise in the income threshold would benefit urban dwellers more than rural dwellers.

Introducing a form of universal FSM provision

In contrast, when considering the options that would offer universal provision, 45% of rural dwellers would benefit from universal provision when a proportionate allocation would be 40%. Therefore, any rollout of universal FSM provision would benefit rural dwellers more than urban dwellers.

2D. Please indicate which of the following rural policy areas the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to primarily impact on.

Rural Businesses	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Tourism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jobs or Employment in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education or Training in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health or Social Care Services in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Poverty in Rural Areas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Deprivation in Rural Areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Crime or Community Safety	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Development	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agri-Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please state)	<input type="text"/>

If the response to Section 2A was YES GO TO Section 3A.

2E. Please explain why the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is NOT likely to impact on people in rural areas.

N/A

SECTION 3 - Identifying the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas

3A. Has the Public Authority taken steps to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas that are relevant to the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?

Yes No If the response is **NO** GO TO Section **3E**.

3B. Please indicate which of the following methods or information sources were used by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

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

3C. Please provide details of the methods and information sources used to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas including relevant dates, names of organisations, titles of publications, website references, details of surveys or consultations undertaken etc.

Using information from the Department's Schools' Census Data 2022/23 (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/topics/statistics-and-research/school-enrolments>), the Department is able to identify the percentage of pupils who live in rural and urban areas. This is also then able to be broken down by free school meal entitlement. As FSM entitlement is used as a proxy for social deprivation, we are able to assess the potential impact of changes to the eligibility criteria in terms of the numbers of pupils gaining access to FSM on rural and urban dwellers through this data.

*The school census exercise was impacted by industrial action in the education sector during the 2023/24 academic year. As a result, the 2022/23 schools census data has been used for the purposes of this assessment.

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

The Department's free school meals (FSM) policy currently provides targeted support to families on low incomes. This is aimed at those children deemed to be most in need and aims to ensure that eligible children have access to a nutritious meal that is suitable as the main meal of the day.

The school census shows that in 2022/23*, 18% of pupils living in a rural area were entitled to FSM. This compares to 34% of pupils living in an urban area being entitled to FSM. As the vast majority of pupils are entitled to FSM because they come from a low-income family, this data allows us to conclude that a 16-percentage point difference between this figures for rural and urban shows there to be a significantly lower proportion of families in rural areas that are from deprived backgrounds.

* The school census exercise was impacted by industrial action in the education sector during the 2023/24 academic year. As a result, the 2022/23 schools census data has been used for the purposes of this assessment.

If the response to Section 3A was YES GO TO Section 4A.

3E. Please explain why no steps were taken by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas?

N/A

SECTION 4 - Considering the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas

4A. Please provide details of the issues considered in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

This review has considered a range of factors that would potentially benefit children through the provision of FSM and Uniform Grants – for example, the provision of these supports would offer much needed financial support to low-income families who continue to struggle with the costs of sending their child(ren) to school. The provision of FSM (whether using means tested eligibility criteria or offering universal FSM provision to all pupils in certain year groups irrespective of income) also enables children to access the health and educational benefits of having a healthy school lunch each day. This helps to develop healthy eating habits at a young age which in turn should positively impact the efforts to reduce childhood obesity. It also helps to reduce the likelihood of children suffering from range of health conditions both as a child and as they grow older. A child accessing a healthy school lunch is also likely to be in a positive position to learn in school after lunch.

All these benefits are applicable to any child receiving a free meal, irrespective of whether they live in an urban or rural area.

SECTION 5 - Influencing the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

5A. Has the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, been influenced by the rural needs identified?

Yes No If the response is **NO** GO TO Section **5C**.

5B. Please explain how the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, has been influenced by the rural needs identified.

N/A

If the response to Section **5A** was **YES** GO TO Section **6A**.

5C. Please explain why the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or the delivery of the Public Service, has NOT been influenced by the rural needs identified.

This policy review aims only to increase the number of pupils that are able to access FSM and Uniform Grants – no options have been considered with the aim of reducing the number of pupils able to access these supports. All options considered would equally be applicable to all pupils, irrespective of whether they live in a rural or urban area.

SECTION 6 - Documenting and Recording

6A. Please tick below to confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained by the Public Authority and relevant information on the Section 1 activity compiled in accordance with paragraph 6.7 of the guidance.

I confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained and relevant information compiled.



Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by:	Adrian Harris
Position/Grade:	SO
Division/Branch	Food In Schools Team
Signature:	Adrian Harris
Date:	13/11/2024
Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:	Jonathan Boyd
Position/Grade:	Grade 7
Division/Branch:	Food in Schools Team
Signature:	Jonathan Boyd
Date:	13/11/2024