

ENRD Thematic Group Rural Proofing - Background document

Analytical overview of rural proofing approaches and lessons learned

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1. What is rural proofing?

Rural proofing is a systematic process to review the likely impacts of policies, programmes and initiatives on rural areas because of their particular circumstances or needs (e.g. dispersed populations and poorer infrastructure networks). In short, it requires policy-makers to 'think rural' when designing policy interventions in order to prevent negative outcomes for rural areas and communities. If it is determined that a policy may have different – negative - impacts in rural areas compared to urban areas, policies should be adjusted to eliminate them. Rural proofing applies to all policy domains, including housing, economic development, transport, health and social care, taxation, welfare, justice, climate change and net zero, etc.

An example might be a policy commitment to provide free bus travel to all children under a specified age. As rural children may lack access to any bus services, this policy decision will not generate the same positive benefits for them as it will for urban children. A second example might be a decision to deliver a new service entirely online. This might unfairly disadvantage (or completely exclude) those in rural areas who lack fast and reliable digital connectivity. Instead, the new service should be made available in a variety of ways to ensure that everyone can access it (e.g. face-to-face, online, mobile and/or shared provision). Service providers may also wish to consider including a 'sparsity factor' in funding decisions too, to reflect the higher delivery cost in rural locations.

In its Cork Declaration in 2016, the European Commission outlined 10 'Policy Orientations', including a commitment to a rural proofing mechanism to ensure rural prosperity (p6). In 2021 (p25), the Commission's 'A Long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas' stated that:

"As part of the Better Regulation Agenda, a rural proofing mechanism will be put in place, notably to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas... The Commission also invites Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at the national, regional and local level."

2. Where has rural proofing been implemented?

Rural proofing has been implemented in a number of countries in the last 20 years or so. Some of these experiences are briefly described here, but it is perhaps worth noting two points at the outset: (1) rural proofing has been subject to criticism by stakeholders and academics in these countries, suggesting that more work needs to be done to maximise its potential positive impacts; and (2) a policy approach that works in one country cannot simply be 'transferred' and adopted in another^{i,ii}.

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2.1 Canada^{iii,iv}

The Rural Secretariat existed in Canada from 1996-2013 within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food. It coordinated the federal government's focus on rural issues, delivered a series of programmes, advocated for rural policy, and promoted dialogue between rural Canadians and the federal government.

The Rural Lens was created in 1998 as an optional policy tool to review federal policies and programmes from the perspectives of people living in rural and remote regions. It was designed to be applied by any government department early in the development of a programme or policy using a guide prepared by the Rural Secretariat. However, there was no legislation that required departments to apply the Rural Lens, if it was applied it tended to be too late in the policy-making process, there were no sanctions if it was not applied, and departments had no responsibility to report back to the Rural Lens Unit (in the Rural Secretariat) on how they implemented their comments.

Some successes were noted, including funding for rural infrastructure and the creation of an Office of Rural Health. However, much of the success occurred 'behind the scenes' with credit given to departments rather than to the Rural Lens/Secretariat. A number of important challenges were also encountered, including: the location of the Rural Secretariat and Rural Lens within the (sector-focused) Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food; the Rural Secretariat had no authority to force horizontal coordination between departments and instead relied on Ministers to make the case to their departments to undertake rural proofing; and the Rural Secretariat lacked staff and financial resources.

The Rural Secretariat's mandate was not renewed in 2013 and it ceased to operate at this time leaving no formal mechanism within the Canadian Government to ensure that new policies/programmes are appropriate for rural communities. Units exist within federal departments with an emphasis on rural, however they do not have a mandate beyond their departments.

2.2 England^{i,ii,iv,v}

A formal commitment to rural proof all domestic policies was introduced in England in the 2000 Rural White Paper. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) produced guidance for policy-makers who have the responsibility for rural proofing, with the Countryside Agency/Commission for Rural Communities (CA/CRC, non-departmental public bodies no longer in existence) responsible for reporting and monitoring rural proofing activity. Defra was also given a championing role for rural proofing to embed it across Government Departments and Government Offices (GOs) in England's regions (also no longer in existence). The GOs were also required to rural proof the activities of other organisations including Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies. Local authorities were also given a rural proofing role to ensure that all policies could be effectively delivered locally, while local Rural Community Councils were tasked with feeding the views of local people into rural policy making processes.

Annual rural proofing reports by the CA/CRC revealed a very mixed picture in terms of the impact and success of rural proofing. The reports highlighted a number of challenges with rural proofing, including: its lack of embeddedness into government department's policy-making processes; when it has been undertaken, it has been too late in the policy-making process; there has been confusion with regard to roles and responsibilities at national, regional and local levels; there have been no consequences when rural proofing has not been adequately carried out; and policy-makers in departments have lacked the knowledge and understanding of rural issues/areas that is required.

There have been regular and repeated calls from rural stakeholders for rural proofing to be re-launched, but for the process to be considerably strengthened and moved beyond a 'tick-box exercise'. In response

Defra has repeatedly re-stated its commitment to rural proofing, revised its [guidance](#) and published '[Rural Proofing in England 2020](#)'. Other organisations have been working to support rural proofing to become more effective, including for example the Rural Services Network, which has recently produced [guidance for local level rural proofing](#).

2.3 Northern Ireland^{iv,vi,vii}

From 2002 until 2015, Northern Ireland closely followed England's approach to rural proofing, but similar challenges were encountered with the effectiveness and impact of the process. In 2015 the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development introduced legislation to the Northern Ireland Assembly to put rural proofing on statutory footing, and in 2016 the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) was passed making Northern Ireland the only country or region to have legislated for rural proofing^{vi}. The Act contains three main areas of responsibility for public authorities relating to: the consideration of rural needs; monitoring and reporting on how the public authority has complied with this requirement; and co-operation and sharing of information with other public authorities. Under the Act, the Department for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is responsible for: regularly reviewing the bodies to which the Act applies; providing [guidance](#) and advice, commissioning research and collating and publishing an annual monitoring report; a Ministerial statement to the Assembly; and making arrangements to secure co-operation and exchange of information between public authorities.

Early evidence suggests that the introduction of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) has not resulted in rural proofing being implemented fully every time it is required by law, though no systematic evaluation has yet been undertaken. Evidence also suggested a need for more clarity over terminology and responsibilities, and for further guidance and support^{viii}. The lack of a regular Ministerial statement has also led to questions around the progress and accountability of rural proofing, and there has also been more fundamental criticism of the approach which: *"entirely stands on an assumption of rural disadvantage, the nature of which is never articulated"*^{vii}.

2.4 Finland^{ix,x}

Finland has a broad and narrow (or targeted) approach to rural policy in order to integrate rural issues into general policies as well as take specific measures when it is appropriate to do so (this is also the approach taken in Norway). Rural proofing is voluntary and is undertaken by policy-makers using guidance and a checklist produced by the Rural Policy Council, which has overall responsibility for the process (from 1995 to 2015 this was the Rural Policy Committee, YTR). The Council is led by the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry and is made up of a number of public, private and third sector organisations from local to national level, including NGOs, government ministries, regional authorities and village action movements, with an accompanying Secretariat. The Council's work is built on strong vertical and horizontal networks, thematic working and advocacy, and it plays a key role in the governance of rural policy.

2.5 Sweden^{ix2}

Tillväxtanalys (the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis) commissioned a report in 2016 focused on exploring rural proofing in England, Canada and Finland and rural policy in Norway and Finland in order to inform rural proofing discussions in the Rural Committee of the Swedish Parliament. Tillväxtverket (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) has overall responsibility for promoting national government agencies to develop rural proofing practices (although there is a preference to refer to the process as 'looking through a geographical lens') with support from other agencies. Regions and

² I would like to acknowledge Dr Patrik Cras at Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet (the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) who provided some up-to-date information on rural proofing in Sweden.

municipalities are also working to implement rural or geographical proofing, including through 'sustainability assessments', but similar challenges have been encountered to those reported elsewhere, for example: what types of knowledge should inform the rural assessment; should it be made at the strategic or operational level; should it be general or site-specific; and how can implementation variations be overcome.

2.6 New Zealand^{iv}

New Zealand introduced a formal commitment to rural proof in 2018 recognising the importance of rural communities to the country but also the different structures, challenges and drivers in these communities which means that the impact and outcomes of new policies and programmes can be different compared to urban areas. The New Zealand Government issued [guidance for policy-makers](#) based on a seven-stage process. A checklist, a document outlining common issues to be considered, and a case study example are all available to policy-makers alongside the guidance.

3. What are the main differences and similarities in the implementation of rural proofing in different countries?

One of the key differences in terms of the implementation of rural proofing is whether the process is **mandatory and backed up by legislation or advisable**. With its Rural Needs Act, Northern Ireland took the decision to make rural proofing a legislative requirement in 2016. England introduced a mandatory commitment to rural proof in 2000 but the lack of consequences for not undertaking it has resulted in it being seen as more or less optional. Rural proofing was not mandatory in Canada, and it is optional but encouraged in Finland. The 'jury is still out' as to whether legislating for rural proofing has made a significant difference to the use, effectiveness and impact of the process in Northern Ireland, but it is fair to say that rural proofing has not been undertaken consistently in any of the countries that have implemented it.

There are also differences between countries in terms of **the roles of different institutions**, including the national agriculture/rural ministry as a rural champion and promoter of rural proofing and source of training, data and expertise across government departments (in England and Northern Ireland for example), and/or its role to monitor and evaluate process or the role of independent or arms-length organisations in terms of monitoring and reporting, such as the CA/CRC in England previously. In Sweden, rural proofing is the responsibility of the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation supported by Tillväxtverket, while in Finland rural proofing is the responsibility of the government appointed Rural Policy Council.

Most countries that have implemented rural proofing have developed **a checklist and guidance** for policy-makers to use to work through particular rural challenges or issues. This keeps the process manageable for policy-makers but it is limiting as usually a checklist can only take account of the most common issues, and it is hard to reflect the diversity of rural circumstances. A checklist is also not a substitute for **full and meaningful engagement** with communities, businesses, stakeholders, etc. Some countries have active and inclusive LEADER-based networks and/or rural movements which can support such engagement and evidence-gathering activities (such as [Finland's Village Action Association, SYTY](#)) and [Northern Ireland's Rural Community Network](#)), though these networks are not always used to their full potential.

Building on this, it is important to reiterate that **the rural context** varies tremendously between (and of course within) countries which may impact on the importance attached to processes like rural proofing. Some countries have much higher rural populations and much more land designated as rural than others; in some countries rural areas are politically important and there is a strong commitment to maintaining

their social fabric (e.g. in the Nordic countries), while in others the term is not widely used and rural areas lack recognition and political powerⁱⁱ. The institutional situation also varies significantly between countries, in relation to the set-up and levels of power of, and relationships between, government at national, regional and local levels and other stakeholders.

This latter point relates to a further difference between countries and that is how far rural proofing is expected to be undertaken by regional and local level organisations and by sectoral delivery organisations, and do they have the capacity and resources to deliver this requirement. Finally, it is worth noting the different emphases placed on rural or 'geographic' proofing in different countries, with the latter effectively a proofing process for all locations, rural and urban, which is important for informing place-based approaches and working. In England, for example, rural proofing has increasingly been seen as the basis for mainstreaming i.e. to ensure that policies are tailored to local needs, whether rural or urban and 'geographic proofing' is the term preferred in Sweden.

4. What key lessons can be learned from these experiences of rural proofing?

As noted earlier in this paper there has been much critique of these experiences of rural proofing, but a number of useful lessons can be highlighted in order to inform the implementation of much more effective processes in future:

- **Rural proofing as a legislative requirement or an optional process?:** There is not yet adequate evidence available as to the extent to which making rural proofing a legislative requirement has led to it always being fully undertaken when it should be, and therefore to 'better' outcomes for rural areas. It will be important to review this in Northern Ireland. It is clear, however, that where it is 'only' optional, rural proofing is unlikely to be undertaken systematically across government. It may be more appropriate to take an approach which requires rural proofing when policy-makers deem it necessary based on full, clear and accessible criteria.
- **Rural proofing needs to be a much more positive process:** To date, rural proofing has been rather negatively focused on identifying the differing needs of rural areas. However, shifting the argument to focus on the requirement for rural proofing to ensure that rural areas maximise their opportunities and positive contributions to economic growth, wellbeing, the environment and achieving net zero, etc. may help to encourage buy-in. It therefore comes to be seen as a process not which presents 'special pleading' for rural areas or an additional burden for policy-makers but a way to be more efficient in the allocation of (ever scarcer) resources to ensure value for money from investments and maximum benefits for rural areas from policy interventions, and to avoid potential unintended negative impacts.
- **The desired outcome/s of rural proofing need to be clear:** The tendency has been for emphasis to be placed on the *process* of rural proofing without enough consideration as to the end goal/s and outcome/s. Clarity on what rural proofing is aiming to achieve is vital. Ultimately the goal should be to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of rural residents, businesses, communities, visitors, etc. The success of rural proofing is not just about its effect on policy processes, but its real impacts for people.
- **Is the under-lying commitment to have separate rural programmes or to ensure national programmes are 'fit-for-purpose' for rural areas as much as they are for urban areas (i.e. rural mainstreaming)?** Some commentators have argued that rural proofing presumes little difference between urban and rural areas and therefore that the same policies can be applied in each place, subject to review to ensure equity, and have the same consequences^{vi,vii}. However, even in a country like England where most rural areas are close to urban centres, this is potentially problematic as there are still challenges to be tackled in these locations, such as demographic pressures and housing

unaffordability, which may require targeted approaches. Moreover, more remote areas will have their own, often quite long-standing and significant, challenges (such as depopulation, lack of service provision, poor transport networks, etc.). Perhaps the 'ideal' situation is one in which there are both:

1. targeted rural policies, initiatives etc. in places where there are particular challenges around sparsity, size, distinct environment characteristics, etc., or where the aim is to target rural people and places specifically (such as through EU-funded Rural Development Programmes); as well as
 2. mainstreamed funding programmes and policies which are fully rural proofed to ensure they are fit-for-purpose for rural areas, but the 'rural premium' is recognised (i.e. the cost of delivering services is higher in rural locations) and therefore local/regional delivery solutions may be different to ensure no places are unfairly disadvantaged. This local tailoring (or perhaps 'geographical proofing'^x) is at the heart of place-based approaches and place-based working, and requires local stakeholders and communities to be centrally involved in decision-making and rural proofing.
- **Rural proofing at national, regional and local levels:** Rural proofing must also take place at all governance levels, assisted by stakeholders, and be done by other (sectoral) delivery organisations (see for example the ['Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit'](#)). The process may need to be flexible to reflect the different circumstances, relationships, responsibilities etc. at regional/local level so tailored guidance and support may be required. The model of 'distributed rural proofing' is interesting here with local level organisations (perhaps led by a local authority) engaging with communities to identify local needs, solutions, etc., in parallel with national and regional authorities undertaking policy impact assessments. Information exchange and collaborative working between these two parts is vital^x.
 - **Clarity over roles and responsibilities:** There is a need for absolute clarity over responsibilities in the rural proofing process and for those individuals/organisations to be appropriately resourced and held accountable. A government's rural department may take lead responsibility for rural proofing but it may struggle to hold other departments to account for their rural impacts, or to encourage collaborative working. Instead it has been suggested that this role could be given to a dedicated 'Rural Policy Unit' within the UK Government's Cabinet Office or equivalent (e.g. the Privy Council in Canada), thereby placing rural issues at the centre of government and enabling direct relationships between there and individual departments; these horizontal relationships are critical to ensuring rural proofing takes place. This approach may be particularly important where there is no rural department in a national government and 'only' an agricultural department. Arrangements need to be flexible enough to stand the test of time as governance, government, policy and political structures change.
 - **Rural proofing must take place from the start of the policy-making process:** This will ensure rural issues are considered from the outset, right through to implementation, delivery and evaluation. A designated person should have responsibility for coordinating rural proofing activity in each government department and for liaising with the lead/championing department/unit. It may be appropriate to develop pilots of programmes or policies to establish their rural impacts. Support and buy-in from senior civil servants as well as politicians is vital.
 - **Policy-makers need to have good knowledge and understanding of rural issues:** This is important in order to undertake rural proofing effectively across government. This requires rural departments to take a proactive role in providing appropriate data, rural-urban definitions/classifications, training and case study examples, and in facilitating meaningful engagement with rural stakeholders and communities.
 - **Engaging with communities is critical:** Arguably, a policy-maker completing a checklist of questions regarding the impact of their policy on rural areas is not enough. Engagement with rural stakeholders and communities needs to be built into the process in future. Though this process is resource-intensive it is the only way to fully understand the lived experiences of proposed/actual policy interventions,

funding streams, etc. in rural areas. Regional and local government and other stakeholders may play a critical role in these processes.

- **The involvement of a wider group of organisations:** It is also worth considering how a wider range of organisations can be usefully involved in rural proofing at all levels. This might include a national statistics agency to promote the use of rural-urban definitions and provide evidence on rural issues, academic researchers working on rural issues, and national and regional rural stakeholder organisations to support local evidence gathering and engagement, for example. There may also be important roles for national audit offices and parliamentary committees and groups, as well as for the minister responsible for rural affairs. These roles may evolve over time as institutional structures and policy priorities and processes shift.
- **Appropriate reporting and monitoring is critical:** Clear and proportionate monitoring and reporting requirements are needed for policy-makers to record their rural proofing activities to inform (annual) reports by the designated body. For completeness, this should include recording instances where the decision was taken that rural proofing was not required and the reasons for this (this information must be collected in Northern Ireland for example). Providing templates to policy-makers for their reporting would be helpful, with clear timetables set out, and it is important to be clear about any enforcement measures or sanctions for non-compliance (if these are deemed important). Where possible, it may be most appropriate for the organisation tasked with monitoring and reporting to be independent of government.

ⁱ Atterton, J. and Skerratt, S. (2016) *Rural Proofing in the UK*, Report for 'Growth Analysis, the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis' for the Parliamentary Rural Areas Committee (August). For more information, see: [Rural social policy and rural proofing – in Finland, Norway, Great Britain and Canada - Tillväxtnalys \(tillvaxtnalys.se\)](#)

ⁱⁱ Shortall, S. and Alston, M. (2016) To Rural Proof or Not to Rural Proof: A Comparative Analysis, *Politics and Policy* 44 (1) pp. 35-55. Available online: [To rural proof or not to rural proof: a comparative analysis. \(ncl.ac.uk\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Hall, H. and Gibson, R. (2016) *Rural Proofing in Canada: An Examination of the Rural Secretariat and Rural Lens*, Report for 'Growth Analysis, the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis' for the Parliamentary Rural Areas Committee (August). For more information, see: [Rural social policy and rural proofing – in Finland, Norway, Great Britain and Canada - Tillväxtnalys \(tillvaxtnalys.se\)](#)

^{iv} Atterton, J. (2019) *Learning Lessons from early Islands Communities Impact Assessments*, Rural Policy Centre Research Report (July). Available online: [Learning Lessons from early ICiAs Final Report SJ 17.02.20.pdf \(sruc.ac.uk\)](#)

^v Atterton, J. (2008) *Rural Proofing in England – A Formal Commitment in Need of Review* Centre for Rural Economy Discussion Paper Series No. 20 (November). Available online: [Discussion Papers - Centre for Rural Economy - Newcastle University \(ncl.ac.uk\)](#)

^{vi} Shortall, S. and Sherry, E. (2017) *Rural proofing in Northern Ireland: An overview and recommendations on guidance, implementation and governance*, AFBI and CRE Report. Available online: [Rural Proofing in Northern Ireland - Overview and Recommendations | Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute \(afbini.gov.uk\)](#)

^{vii} Sherry, E. and Shortall, S. (2019) Methodological fallacies and perceptions of rural disparity: How rural proofing addresses real versus abstract needs, *Journal of Rural Studies* 69, pp.336-343. Available online: [Methodological fallacies and perceptions of rural disparity: how rural proofing addresses real versus abstract needs - ePrints - Newcastle University \(ncl.ac.uk\)](#)

^{viii} ENRD (2017) *Focus on Rural Proofing*, Rural Connections, the European Rural Development Magazine, Autumn/Winter 2017. Available online: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-connections-magazine-autumn-winter-2017-edition_en

^{ix} Tillväxtnalys (2016) *Landsbygdspolitik och landsbygdssäkring – i Finland, Norge, Storbritannien och Kanada* (Östersund: Myndigheten för tillväxtpolitiska utvärderingar och analyser). Available online: https://www.tillvaxtnalys.se/download/18.62dd45451715a00666f1fb61/1586366199439/pm_2016_11_Landsbygdspolitik_la_ndsbygdssäkring.pdf

^x Nordberg, K. (2020) Distributed Rural Proofing: An Essential Tool for the Future of Rural Development, *Sociologia Ruralis* 61 (1), pp. 141-162. Available online: [Kenneth Nordberg – Publications — Åbo Akademi University \(abo.fi\)](#)