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**RE: REVIEW OF THE LIST OF BODIES AND PERSONS SET OUT IN THE SCHEDULE
TO THE RURAL NEEDS ACT (NI) 2016**

Dear Minister Muir,

I am writing in response to DAERA's ongoing review of the schedule included in the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016; and the Department's request for input with regards to which additional bodies or persons should be included in the updated schedule. Firstly, the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) welcomes that the Department has considered older people in its rural needs annual reporting.¹

It is vital that each department is aware of the needs of older people, and the current implications of an ageing population. As such, COPNI would take the opportunity to highlight its recent publication, *At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population*,² to the Department. COPNI's report outlines the implications of ongoing and rapid demographic ageing in Northern Ireland generally and in specific policy areas.³

The insight offered by COPNI's most recent report should add urgency to DAERA's research, which indicates that the average age of farmers in Northern Ireland in 2018 was

¹ As included in the *Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report*, initiatives undertaken by the Department include the Platinum Jubilee Garden Award, which will increase access to safe green space, where older people can meet to socialise; and the Marginalised Minority Border Communities Digital Access Pilot Scheme for voluntary and community organisations in rural areas, which will promote digital inclusion. The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report also recognises the Age Friendly strategies in both Armagh, Banbridge, and Craigavon and Mid Ulster, and Southern Health and Social Care Trust's Good Morning – Evening service.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2024) *Rural Needs: Annual Monitoring Report*. Available at: [https://www.daera-](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/23.24.137%20Rural%20Needs%20Annual%20Monitoring%20Report%20final.PDF)

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² Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2024) *At the centre of government planning: The Programme for Government and preparing for an ageing population*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/At-the-Centre-of-Government-Planning-The-Programme-for-Government-and-preparing-for-an-ageing-population.pdf>

³ Policy areas include economy, pension, health and social care provision, housing provision, loneliness and social exclusion, and discrimination.

58.⁴ This figure will increase as Northern Ireland's population ages, and this will have implications for Department priorities, rural community sustainability, service availability, and industry.

For example, existing research warns of cumulative cycles of decline in rural settings. One study links poor employment opportunity with out-migration, which can lead to an imbalance of age structures, which exacerbates poor employment potential. Critically, this is followed by a reduction in social service provision, which has implications for older people, and rural sustainability more generally.⁵ Overall, this research highlights the connection between population ageing, rural employment opportunity, regional investment, and service provision. As such, the Department should consider any work to support an ageing population as integral to the sustainability and development of rural life and industry.

COPNI would therefore request that the significant future impact of population ageing is considered in DAERA's rural needs assessment, and that the Department involves relevant age-friendly and older people teams when engaging across the existing schedule. COPNI also welcomes any updates on DAERA initiatives and are open to all future engagement relevant to older people and an ageing population.

Yours sincerely



Evelyn Hoy
Chief Executive
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

⁴ Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (2018) *Update of Equality (Section 75) Indicators for Farmers*. Available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/update-equality-section-75-indicators-farmers>

⁵ Varley, McDonagh and Shortall (2009) *The Politics of Rural Sustainability*. Available at: <http://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/46719/1/44.pdf>