

This document has been developed as part of the work carried out by the ENRD Contact Point to support the activities of the Thematic Group (TG) on 'Rural Proofing', and it is based on inputs submitted by TG members. The information and views set out in this document do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

Thematic Group working document

A Framework of Rural Proofing Actions

Draft

Introduction

Published in 2021, the European Commission's ['A Long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas'](#) invited Member States to consider implementing rural proofing at national, regional and local levels. At the [first meeting](#) of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on Rural Proofing in January 2022, participants heard how rural proofing has been/is being implemented in EU Member States and beyond, and the discussion resulted in a [synthesis document](#) outlining the key ingredients for successful rural proofing.

This working document builds on these ingredients to suggest a framework of actions required for meaningful rural proofing to be achieved. The document identifies five actions that are essential to undertake in the short-term and four that are desirable to undertake over a longer-term timescale.

This framework of actions aims to support policy-makers and all stakeholders involved in designing or implementing rural proofing mechanism in their particular context. It expresses the views and exchanges within the framework of the TG and as a working document it does not aim to provide a finalised fully comprehensive checklist of actions.

The policy, political and institutional contexts at national, regional and local levels are very different across Member States, as are the scale and extent of rural areas, and the extent to which rural areas are recognised as a national priority. Therefore, while countries may share very similar visions for their rural communities, the design and delivery of rural proofing mechanisms to achieve those visions may vary substantially, for example, in terms of the order of the actions and the stakeholders involved.

A framework of essential actions

Action 1: Clear statement of strong (and real) political will and commitment

A **'high level' announcement** that rural proofing will be required and that sets out the benefits of undertaking it is a vital action. In reality, this is perhaps the most essential and top priority action and the development of templates, guidance, monitoring frameworks, etc. can come after. This announcement needs to come from a country's Rural Affairs Minister or, better still, Prime Minister. Such an announcement signifies top-level political commitment to ensuring the visibility of rural areas and issues and that they will be consistently high up the national policy agenda. It also ensures that everyone is working with a common understanding of rural areas, rural issues (both challenges and opportunities) and

the process of rural proofing. It is important to use language that is appropriate to each national context to maximise this buy-in.

This **high-level commitment should be re-stated regularly** (at least annually alongside the Ministerial report to Parliament outlined in Action 5) and must transcend political cycles (i.e., it needs to be cross-party) and its continuity safeguarded. It should also clearly set out the levels at which rural proofing is required and clearly explain the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors.

Based on past/current experiences of implementing rural proofing, a **mandatory commitment to rural proofing** should be introduced and enforced, and it is worth considering if this should, in time, be supported by legislation. Linked to this, it is worth considering the nature and extent of **enforcement measures** that should be established to ensure consistent adherence to rural proofing requirements. In this way, departments that do not fully carry out rural proofing should be appropriately sanctioned (e.g., through refusal for the policy/legislation to be passed). Having said that, policy-makers need to be given adequate time to 'learn' how to rural proof, so it would be worth being flexible at the outset.

Action 2: Establish a positive, shared vision of rural areas

The high level announcement described in Action 1 needs to set out a shared vision of rural areas, which has been co-designed with relevant (rural and other) stakeholders. It also needs to **highlight the importance of rural proofing** as a mechanism for achieving that vision and for maximising the contributions of rural areas to national priorities.

Positive language about rural proofing is a means to fully secure these contributions. It is therefore vital to ensure it is not viewed as an additional burden for policy-makers. Rural areas have much to offer to their countries in economic, social, cultural and environmental terms. It also needs to be emphasised that rural proofing is about ensuring that all residents of a country have fair and equitable rights and access to resources regardless of where they are living. A **common understanding** of the rural opportunities and challenges is vital, as is a clarity over formal definitions of rural, for everyone, including policy-makers, NGOs, community and voluntary groups, etc.

Action 3: Establish clear and coordinated roles and responsibilities

It is essential that all actors involved in rural proofing processes at national, regional and local levels clearly understand their **specific roles and responsibilities**, including the need to work together through a **coordinated and partnership approach**.

Existing experience suggests, at national level, it is the Department of Rural Affairs (or equivalent **coordination body**, further only 'lead RP body') that tends to be responsible for ensuring that policy-makers in other Departments undertake rural proofing in their policy decisions. However, such arrangements can be challenging to enforce and so should be kept under review. The lead RP body should have a mandate from the Cabinet to pursue a cross government action. An alternative approach may be

for a Cabinet level Office or equivalent body to lead, given their greater scope to influence the work of others across Government.

At national level, undertaking rural proofing should be the responsibility of individual policy-makers in their respective sectorial departments. The lead RP body will **need to be resourced** to undertake a vital support work for rural proofing and should consider having dedicated staff as ‘first points of contact’ for rural proofing queries from other departments. **Regular cross-Government** (i.e., horizontal) **thematic working groups** may be worth considering, in which rural policy-makers provide rural-focused data and analysis on particular issues (e.g. transport, housing, business support, etc.) to raise awareness and improve understanding.

A range of **other stakeholders** should have other clearly defined roles in rural proofing **at national level**. These will vary across different countries but will include rural interest stakeholders (such as rural movements and networks, LEADER-related groups, rural academics, NGOs, etc.), as well as Parliamentary Committees and Cross-Party Groups. They may have a role in contributing evidence to inform rural proofing, and/or being directly consulted on particular policies/strategies, and/or providing an independent review role. These roles may be performed in various ways, such as through regular meetings or ad hoc engagement. Again, organisations need to be resourced to undertake these important roles on an ongoing basis.

It is equally vital that there are clearly defined roles and **responsibilities at regional and local levels**. Naturally, the organisations involved will vary across Member States, and the (vertical) relationships between regional/local and national level will also vary. However, it is likely that regional and local authorities (i.e., local government) will play a leading role when they are designing and delivering policies, while elected officials will have an important scrutiny role. Again, they need to be resourced to undertake this activity.

The principle of **engaging local rural groups, networks, communities and citizens** in rural proofing is essential, but the mechanisms for achieving this in different Member States will vary. Some countries have strong grassroots-focused rural and village movements for example, which provide a direct means of feeding views from ‘on-the-ground’ to policy-makers at national and regional levels. Some countries have regular Rural Parliament events instead/as well which provide a more ad hoc opportunity for views to be fed into policy. Other countries which do not have such arrangements may need to establish new mechanisms for gathering such grassroots views through consultation or deeper forms of engagement.

Action 4: Develop a clear template and guidance and robust accompanying evidence

Most of those countries that have already implemented rural proofing have developed a **template for policy-makers to follow and accompanying guidance**, so there are examples to draw on. The template needs to be clear and straightforward for policy-makers across all departments and regional/local bodies to follow, but robust enough to ensure that this is not simply a tick box exercise. Accompanying guidance needs to set out the key steps in the process of rural proofing, including stakeholder engagement, and the outcomes and impacts that are sought, linked to the overarching rural vision in Action 1.

Countries may consider whether to implement a **requirement for all policies**, strategies, funding streams, etc. to be fully rural proofed from the outset, **or whether to prioritise key policy/legislative issues** or developments at least initially. If the latter approach is taken, there will need to be transparency about how these priority areas are selected and the timescale for the shift to consider all policy issues.

Alternatively, countries could adopt an approach whereby **initial light-touch screening** is undertaken by the lead organisation to determine whether the policy, etc. may result in significantly different impacts in rural areas. If so, detailed rural proofing should then be undertaken; if not, the decision, and the rationale for it, is recorded and full proofing is not required. This may be an appropriate approach to take initially while rural proofing is 'new' and organisations are building up experience and knowledge of undertaking it, in particular at regional level. What is critical, however, is that it is clear and transparent which organisation makes the decision as to whether to fully proof or not, how significantly different impacts are defined, and the evidence used in reaching the decision.

Alongside the provision of a template and guidance is the creation and **availability of a robust rural evidence base**, so that policy-makers and other stakeholders at all levels have access to up-to-date and accurate data to understand the characteristics, challenges and opportunities facing rural areas in their countries and regions and, importantly, the diversity of these rural areas (e.g., accessible, remote, mountainous, coastal, islands, etc.). The lead RP body has a key role to play here in generating and collating the evidence, but also in encouraging all other departments and national statistical agencies to use rural-urban identifiers on their datasets and to use the officially recognised rural-urban definition/classification. **Dedicated lead RP body staff** will need to be available on both an ongoing and ad hoc basis to assist policy colleagues in other departments with interpreting this data. Rural academics can also support this need for robust evidence gathering and interpretation. 'Good practice' rural proofing examples should also be provided as part of this evidence base for policy-makers to follow.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that in countries where a robust mechanism is already in place for undertaking **Territorial Impact Assessments (TIA)**, rural proofing should complement and add value to these Assessments rather than duplicate them. Close and ongoing dialogue will need to be maintained between the lead RP body and the Department responsible for designing and monitoring TIAs to ensure that the processes remain complementary and do not overlap.

Action 5: Establish clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impacts and success of rural proofing are vitally important. These **impacts should ultimately be measured** against the vision set out in Action 1. There may be a variety of different elements to this monitoring. In some countries that have already implemented rural proofing, the Rural Affairs Minister presents an annual report to Parliament updating politicians on the impacts of the process, how well it is being implemented, etc. This is important as it helps to keep rural areas and issues at the forefront of political debates and provides an opportunity for Parliamentary scrutiny of the process and its outcomes.

Alongside this, an **annual collation of detailed evidence** on where rural proofing has been undertaken at national level and what it has achieved should be undertaken by the lead RP body. Successful examples and case studies could be highlighted and discussed in order to inform ongoing learning on how to improve the process. This information could also be housed on an online repository alongside rural data. At regional level, it may be most appropriate for local governments to lead **the monitoring of rural proofing activity** while information may need to be gathered from a wide range of stakeholders involved (e.g., local health boards, etc.).

Beyond this, however, at all levels it is also important that **independent evaluation** is undertaken, perhaps by rural stakeholders and/or academics to provide a potentially more critical and robust viewpoint on the impacts of rural proofing. Such an evaluation should consider rural proofing activities by government but also by the wider range of potential actors who would be required to do this (e.g., NGOs, etc.). **Constant learning from the annual monitoring and evaluation work** is crucial to ensure that rural proofing is continuously improved and its impacts maximised at all the levels.

Longer-term work in support of rural proofing

Alongside these essential actions, there are also a number of ongoing activities which are desirable to ensure that rural proofing continues to be robust, yet straightforward, for policy-makers to implement. The remainder of this document identifies four such activities.

1. Ensuring that **parallel learning** takes place from (and to) other forms of ‘proofing’ (e.g. gender, sustainability, etc.) and impact assessments (relating to geography, communities of interest, etc.). This collective learning will also help to demonstrate that policy-makers are required to consider many different dimensions when designing and delivering policies, and rural is only one, so they must balance all of these competing needs.
2. **Ongoing dialogue** is important **between national and regional/local levels** to ensure that rural proofing actions at one geographical level are not undermining or duplicating those at another, but instead they are complementary and working towards the same rural outcome/s.
3. Ongoing consideration of the balance between robust rural proofing to achieve rural mainstreaming and the need for dedicated rural-specific policies, programmes and funding streams should be in place. **Rural proofing is not a substitute for targeted rural policy**. Evidence suggests that effectively delivered mainstreamed policies and programmes are almost always more successful and sustainable than short-term, standalone rural-specific interventions; place-proofing, based on the characteristics of all different places, is vital to ensure that such mainstreamed policies are ‘fit-for-purpose’ for all locations.
4. The role of the lead RP body and wider rural stakeholders, including rural citizens but also European-wide networks, in positively supporting the **learning and capacity-building of policy-makers** at national, regional and local levels is critical to achieve meaningful and successful rural proofing. It is important to remember that rural proofing is a process which will take time for policy-makers to learn.