



Review of rural proofing instruments and experiences in European and non- European countries

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1. Introduction

Task 1.3 of RUSTIK envisages the discussion of three main points:

- 1) Rural proofing: scope, methodological approaches and pros and cons
- 2) Concrete experiences in Europe and non-European countries. Differences and similarities. Impacts on policy change and revision processes in the real world
- 3) Rural proofing needs in terms of basic information and monitoring systems. Provision of a methodology of rural proofing to be discussed and tested within rural stakeholders in each Pilot Region

The methodology to be used:

- Review of the existing literature
- Three significant case study (two European and one non-European), but with concrete experiences and lessons to be drawn.
- Three interviews (one for each case study) with relevant people involved in rural proofing government and management.
- Interviews based on a common list of questions.
- Case studies discussed according to a similar framework (including evolution of rural proofing, institutional responsibilities, and type of delivery)

Three case studies have been chosen as examples of Rural Proofing implementation. Criteria for the choice of case studies have been the following: England has a long-standing and well-established tradition of application at the national level; Finland has tried to apply this approach at the local (municipal) level and, indeed, is the EU country that has experimented more in this field; the USA case appears helpful for fostering local communities to consider key challenges and viable policy solutions to face a specific health crisis but with a holistic approach.

2. Rural proofing: scope, methodological approaches and pros and cons

2.1 Definitions and policy relevance

Rural Proofing (RP) was first introduced in 2000 following the Government's publication of the *White Paper, Our Countryside, the future. A fair deal for Rural England*. In the subsequent years, there was an evolution in conception and use of RP in England (see section 3.1) and in other UK regions.

The concept was included, at the EU level, in 2016 by the Cork 2.0 Declaration proposing a RP mechanism to ensure that EU policies and strategies better recognised the potential of rural areas to deliver innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for current and future societal challenges.





In 2020, the OECD published “Rural Well-being: Geographies of Opportunities”, that recognises the importance of RP to review new policy initiatives, but states that “governments also need to ensure policy complementarities among different policy strategies” (OECD, 2020).

In 2021, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas confirms the need to review policies through rural lens, recognising the potential impacts and implications of these policies on rural jobs and growth and development prospects.

In the same year, the European Commission issued “*The Better Regulation Guidelines Toolbox (Tool #34)*” where RP is framed in the broader context of impact assessment at territorial level: “*Impact assessments and evaluations should systematically consider territorial impacts when they are relevant and there are indications that they will be significant for different territories of the EU. Thanks to territorial impact assessments (TIA) and rural proofing, the needs and specificities of different EU territories can be better taken into account (for instance of urban/rural areas, cross-border areas and the EU outermost regions) to facilitate cohesion across the Union.*” (EC, 2021).

The ENRD has set up a working group on RP in 2022 and J. Atterton prepared a background document providing a comprehensive definition of RP: “*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*” (Atterton, 2022).

2.2 Definitions, policy relevance and methods of RP

RP has been implemented in different countries, both in the European context and non-European one. Table 1 summarises the main features of RP in each country, based on a meta-analysis of different comparative studies which have been conducted in the two last decades. The table below includes those countries with a well-established RP procedure, institutions involved, methodologies which have been designed to this aim.

The idea of rural proofing has been present within the processes of developing policies and programmes in a number of countries since the turn of the millennium at least. However, as this section will show, it is not generally considered to have been implemented effectively in any country to date. RP was initiated in England at the beginning of 2000s and then was adopted in the second decade in Northern Ireland and Scotland. RP was also adopted in extra-European countries and gained attention in the first decade (table 1).

The RP thematic focus varies from country to country. In most of countries RP is applied to policy impact on living conditions and well-being in rural areas: this implies taking into consideration a broad range of policies (from infrastructures, social services, etc. to environment and business development). This ensures a good margin of flexibility to screening out those policies not having significant impact and concentrate the proof only on relevant policies. In some countries, RP is activated when specific rural territories could be impacted by policies: this is the case of island communities (Scotland) or sparsely depopulated areas (Finland).





The case of Ireland has been considered in this analysis, but not included since “there has been no lack of intent on the part of successive governments for more than two decades to put in place a rural proofing model for Ireland. These commitments highlight a shared recognition that policies across all Government Departments have the potential to impact on rural areas” (Parnell and Lynch, 2022, p. 24).

Table 1: Comparative characteristics of RP in different countries

Country	Starting year	Thematic focus	Methodologies	Guidelines	Monitoring activity
European countries					
England	2000	Policies having impact on Infrastructures, services, working and living conditions, environment, equality	Checklist; Decision Tree; Examples of possible assesment. Descriptive assessment of impacts	DEFRA practical guidelines	Annual RP Reports
Northern Ireland	2015-17	All national policy proposals having an impact on the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of rural communities	Rural needs impact assessment: coherence of likely impact with social and economic needs of rural areas	DAERA guidelines for public Authorities (updated in 2018)	Annual Monitoring Reports
Scotland	2020	Policies with specific and differentiated impacts on Islands Communities	Island Communities Impact Assessment		No reports
Finland	2007	Policies having impact on municipal merging, rural livelihoods, expertise, housing and services, accessibility, attractiveness factors and community cohesion. Emphasis on sparsely depopulated areas.	Checklist produced by Rural Policy Council, with 6 thematic areas and flexible application	Guidelines produced by the Rural Policy Council and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	No reports
Extra-European countries					
Canada	1998 up to 2013	Federal policies and programmes from the perspectives of remote and rural regions	Rural Lens: process in 10 stages, including a template to fill, questions to answer and examples to follow.	Guide prepared by Rural Secretariat	No reports
New Zealand	2008	Policies having impact on infrastructure, health, education, business development and equity	Impact Assessment Checklist; Process in 7 stages	RP Guide (2008 and 2018). Guidance Tool for Agencies	No reports
Australia	2003	Regional services	Regional Impact Assessment Statement (RIAS)		No reports

Source: our elaboration

RP is often conducted through a checklist approach including crucial questions about likely impacts of the concerned policies on rural areas. These questions are submitted to the staff responsible for managing the single policy. The assessment process is always articulated in several steps (see the example of England) and in different thematic areas (i.e., impacts on services, education, transports and other specific rural population needs) (table 1). One of the crucial objectives is checking to what extent the concerned policy intervention impacts positively or negatively on the population needs and will affect the use of regional/local resources. Checklist is often the core of RP, but methods for checklist completion differ. When used at the national level, manly one or few public officials of the concerned administration assess the potential effects based on their knowledge and experience, At the regional or local level, the process bring in different stakeholders (i.e., the case of Finland). Many authors argue that checklist might result





as poor-quality tool due to genericity. Actually, there must be a trade-off between accessibility and precision of the tool: RP is designed in most cases to be applied by sectoral government departments and regional offices without having sufficient preparation and not being administratively burdensome.

Many organisations, at all levels, have tailored and adapted the checklist approach since it was introduced by the central government in England (Wilson Associates and Rural Innovation, 2008). Checklist adaptation seemed necessary for the different organisations, particularly in sectors such as health, skills and the voluntary sector.

2.3 The governance of RP

RP can be mandatory or voluntary within the institutional system: the former case applies in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, the latter in the other countries (table 2). As J. Atterton pointed out, “where it is ‘only’ optional, rural proofing is unlikely to be undertaken systematically across government” (2022, p,5). But even when RP is mandatory, surveys highlight a very heterogeneous and not uniform application.

Table 2: Governance features of RP in different countries

Country	Mandatory/voluntary application	Level and policy stage of application	Responsible body/Coordination	Institutional bodies engaged
European countries				
England	In principle mandatory, but practically patchy application	Open level of application, but mainly national	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Government Departments and Offices. RP lead in each department
Northern Ireland	Mandatory	Mainly national	Departm. Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).	Rural needs Coordinators in each public authority and appropriate staff to conduct impact assessment
Scotland	Mandatory (with justification for not doing it) only for policies having effects on Scottish Islands	Mainly regional	Scottish Government	
Finland	Voluntary, no sanctions	Open level of application, but mainly at regional and local level. Early stages, but potentially throughout the policy lifecycle	Rural Policy Council, led by Minister of Agriculture and forestry	Individual public officials and authorities in charge of policy under assessment
Extra-European countries				
Canada	Voluntary, no sanctions	National level. Early stage of a programme/policy, but applicable also at later stages	Rural Secretariat, under the Departm. Of Agriculture and Agri-Food, with a specific Rural Lens Unit	Government Department
New Zealand	Voluntary, no sanctions	Open level of application. At early stages and throughout policy development	Ministry of Primary Industries, supported by a RP core group providing methodological advice	Authorities responsible for the policy under RP

Source: our elaboration





RP is applied mainly at national level, although the methodology is potentially open to all levels. Only exception is Finland, where it has been used at the regional and municipal level (see section 3.2). In most cases, RP use has been promoted at the early stages of the policy lifecycle, to ensure that a proper assessment of rural implications might influence the decision-making process. Potentially, RP needs to be used throughout the policy cycle, within the policy review and scouting processes. *“Central legislation and policy guidance should take account of rural circumstances and needs, as should regional strategies, as should sub-regional or local strategies and delivery plans”* (Wilson Associates and Rural Innovation, 2008, p.20).

Lead responsibility for steering and coordinating RP is mostly taken by agriculture, food and rural affairs Ministries/Departments (i.e., in England and Northern Ireland competences also include environmental issues). The main challenge in all countries (and regions) is ensuring that other departments implement a RP process in a collaborative mindset. To do so, institutions responsible for RP need always to establish horizontal relationships and support activities to ensure RP takes place. The presence of a dedicated team/core group can facilitate this process (table 2). Likewise, ad hoc designated staff is crucial to ensuring the coordination of RP activity in each government department and liaising with the lead department/unit. This aspect finds solutions in some countries (England, Northern Ireland, Finland).

3. Concrete experiences in Europe and non-European countries

3.1 The England case study

Table 3: Summary of Rural Proofing mechanisms in England

Rural proofing in England	
When was rural proofing introduced?	Is it mandatory?
In the 2000 White Paper ‘Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England’	In principle, rural proofing of policies is mandatory. However, it is a political rather than a legislative commitment, and has a very different status from e.g. equality proofing.
Responsible institutions?	
National level	DEFRA oversees rural proofing across the government. The Rural Affairs Board provides strategic guidance. It meets on a regular basis to discuss issues affecting rural areas. It is chaired by DEFRA’s non-executive Director.





	Each government Department has a nominated 'rural proofing lead' who has the role to 'champion' rural proofing in policy development. These leads meet as a network with the aim of sharing best practice, identifying common issues, and helping to steer work on rural proofing.
Sub-national level	No mandatory responsibilities at the sub-national level. However, representative organisations (e.g. RSN) advocate key issues from the ground to the national level.
What policies are included?	At what stage of policy process is it applied?
The 2000 white paper stated a formal commitment by the Government to rural proof all domestic policies. However, in practice, the delivery of rural proofing varies significantly depending on the policy area.	Rural proofing is intended to take place early in the policy design process, but findings suggests that, where rural proofing has been applied, it is often done much later.
Is there guidance for implementation?	What is the methodology?
National guidance on implementation, including a rural proofing checklist, was developed by DEFRA in 2017.	According to DEFRA guidance, departments should consider how policies can affect rural regions. The approach uses decision trees and guiding questions along with a descriptive assessment of impacts.
What are the measures included in the delivery of rural proofing?	
At the national level, DEFRA's work entails the promotion of rural proofing through, e.g. guidance, training, workshops, research, statistics and regular meetings with departments. DEFRA is also involved in promoting rural proofing at the ministerial level, e.g. through its representation in various cabinet committees.	
What are the main products of rural proofing?	
Annual report by DEFRA. However, it has been challenging to show how government policies have impacted as departments do not necessarily want to show the extent to which they have / have not considered rural proofing.	

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on European Committee of the Regions (COTER) (2022), DEFRA (2017, 2020) and Atterton (2022)

3.1.1 Evolution of rural proofing in England

In England, the 2000 White Paper titled 'Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England' (see Box 1) announced the formal commitment by the Government to rural proof all





domestic policies. Since then, successive administrations have claimed to have incorporated it into policymaking (Jones, 2022). While some good practice examples of rural proofing have been noted, especially at the local level, the progress of rural proofing has been uneven across Government departments and lacked embeddedness into Departments' policymaking processes (Atterton, 2008; Atterton, 2020; Cookson, 2008; House of Lords, 2019a). Moreover, the discernible results stemming from rural proofing efforts have been regarded as unsatisfactory (Atterton, 2008). Therefore, while there is a relatively long historical context of rural proofing in England, the commitment is political rather than legislative, and the practical delivery has varied significantly depending on the policy area in question.

Box 1: Commitment to rural proofing in England in the 2000 White Paper

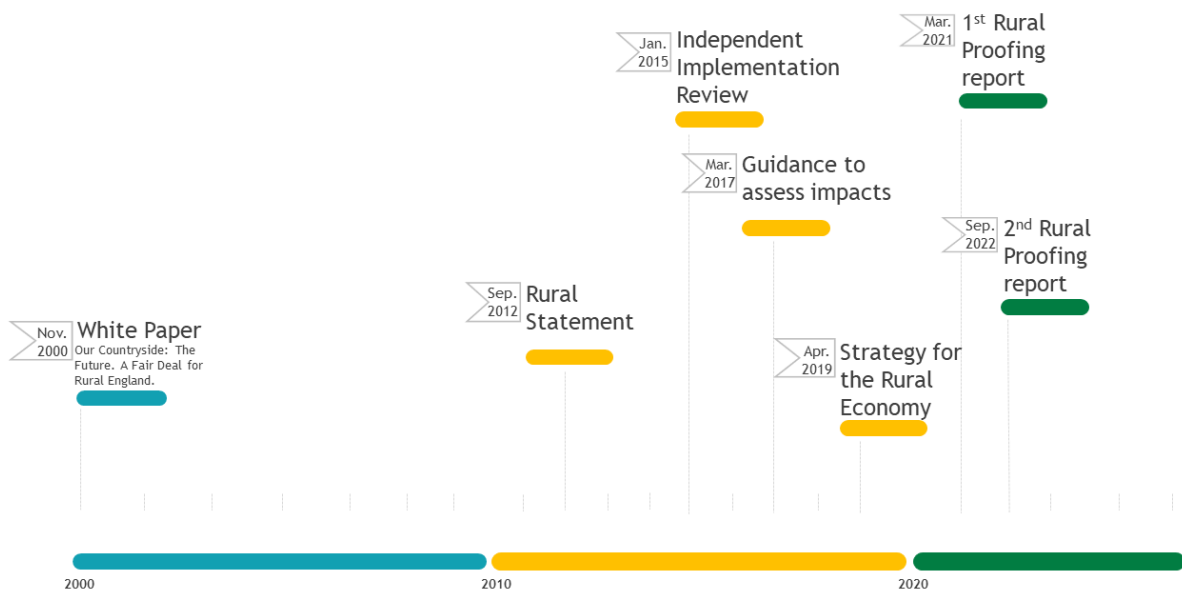
Rural proofing in the Government White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England', p.158

'Rural proofing means that as policy is developed and implemented, policy makers should systematically:

- *Think about whether there will be any significant differential impacts in rural areas;*
- *If there are such impacts, assess what these might be;*
- *Consider what adjustments/compensations might be made to fit rural circumstances.'*

Since the inception of rural proofing in England over 20 years ago, successive governments have published various statements on their commitment to rural proofing, commissioned an independent review, and provided guidance on implementation, including a rural proofing checklist. The key stages are discussed below and summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Evolution of Rural Proofing in England



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Jones, 2022





The 2000 White Paper introduced by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) cemented a commitment to rural proofing and sought to embed it in Government Departments and Government Offices. At that point, DEFRA took on a ‘championing’ role for rural proofing, with the Countryside Agency (CA)/Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) (which are no longer in existence) producing annual rural proofing reports on the impacts of rural proofing initiatives; and revealing ‘a very mixed picture’ (Atterton, 2020, p. 2). After more than a decade, the government in England reaffirmed its support for rural proofing with a Rural Statement in 2012, which underlined a vision for economic growth, rural engagement, and quality of life in these areas. It was also around this time that the five Rural Growth Networks were created to help the economy in rural areas in England, as well as other initiatives related to farm and forestry, tourism, and skills and knowledge transfer (DEFRA, 2012). The government statement highlighted the role of policymakers in considering the ‘rural impacts of their policies and programmes and, where necessary, to make adjustments to achieve equally effective and successful outcomes for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas’ (DEFRA, 2012, p.7).

In the following years, several milestones marked the development of rural proofing in England. To assess the advancements and impact, an independent review of rural proofing was commissioned in 2015, and headed by Lord Cameron of Dillington, former Chair of the House of Lords Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Committee. To ensure a thorough examination of the consequences of rural policies, the assessment recommended, among other things, that DEFRA Ministers work with the Cabinet Office to improve the rural proofing guidelines for policy impact evaluations. It also demanded that rural proofing be applied more methodically, with greater openness and transparency, across several Departments (Lord Cameron of Dillington, 2015). Lord Cameron of Dillington also argued that DEFRA had been slow to recognise that more than 90 percent of the rural workforce is not engaged in land management, but instead employed within sectors such as services, manufacturing, and tourism, which had inevitably skewed the perception of these regions and the policies affecting them (House of Lords, 2019a). At the same time, rural affairs suffered cuts over other portfolios within DEFRA’s remit, and central Government departments were noted to have a ‘patchy record on attention to rural issues’, restricting rural proofing action and assessments (House of Lords, 2019a, art. 63, p. 34). In response to the evaluation, the government stated that DEFRA would work with the Cabinet Office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to incorporate rural proofing more fully into the creation of governmental policy and the process of evaluating impacts. It was also emphasised that Departments would be compelled to include information about rural proofing in their annual reporting processes, simplifying the review and oversight of their efforts and outcomes (DEFRA, 2015).

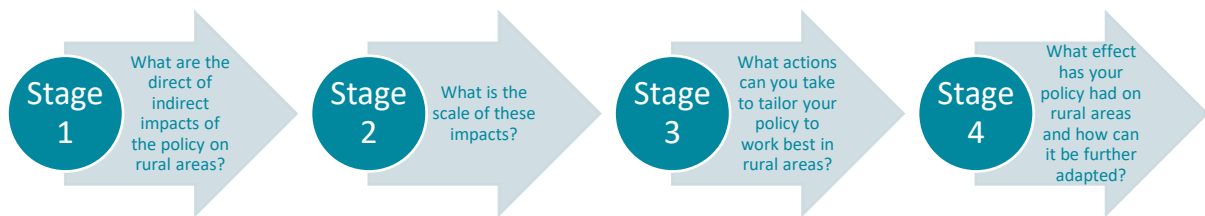
Building on the recommendations from the independent review, DEFRA developed practical guidelines in 2017 to progress the evaluation of how policies would affect rural regions (DEFRA, 2017, see Figure 2). The guidance included a rural proofing checklist, which covered a wide range of actions, such as: allowing for higher rural unit delivery costs in funding formulae or allocations; considering alternative methods for delivering and accessing services in rural areas; ensuring that the needs of smaller businesses are specifically met; giving local delivery bodies the flexibility to find the best local solutions; and engaging with rural stakeholders and their networks (DEFRA, 2017, p. 19). According to DEFRA guidance, departments should consider how policies can affect rural regions. The approach includes the use of decision trees and guiding questions in the form





of a checklist, along with a descriptive assessment of impacts (COTER, 2022; Atterton, 2022; DEFRA, 2017) (Figure 2). Stage 1 of the checklist considers the identification of issues or themes to be considered, including common themes in a table such as access to services and infrastructure, living and working in rural areas (including employment), environment, and distribution, equality, devolution, and funding. Stage 2 assesses the scale of impacts and includes a decision tree to gather rural proofing evidence. For example, when considering access to infrastructure and services, a levels of accessibility analysis could be carried out. Stage 3 considers the delivery mechanisms for a policy in a rural area (e.g., community transport, mobile libraries, etc.), and Stage 4 the development of a post-implementation review plan, identifying the data to be collected and the methods for evaluating. Rural stakeholders are also identified in the guidance document (DEFRA, 2017), as well as relevant sources of rural data (e.g. census analyses).

Figure 2: Guidance on the process of rural proofing(DEFRA, 2017, p. 4)



In 2018, a Rural Academic Panel was formed by DEFRA and continued working until 2021 to provide expert advice on rural policy development. This was followed by a Statement of Rural Research Priorities, as a framework for government and academic research (DEFRA, 2021a). By 2019, some good practice examples of rural proofing had been cited (see section 0 below). However, a report by the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy recognised that rural proofing implementation had been challenging. This criticism related to issues such as delays in implementation, inadequate consultation, inconsistent application, and a deficiency in transparency and accountability. Furthermore, it was noted that the absence of a requirement for local authorities and public bodies to implement rural proofing in local policies, even as they formulate local economic and industrial strategies, had resulted in limited compliance. Consequently, the Committee underscored the substantial need for enhancing the execution of rural proofing practices (House of Lords, 2019a).

A broader resurgence of the concept of rural proofing and a revision of the government guidance can be said to have occurred since 2020, also in response to the recommendations made by the independent review and the Select Committee. DEFRA re-stated its commitment to rural proofing by issuing the publication 'Rural Proofing in England 2020', described by the then Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, Lord Gardiner of Kimble, as 'the first cross-government rural proofing report' (DEFRA, 2021, p.5). This report highlighted the government's pledges to fortify the rural economy, enhance rural infrastructure, provide rural services, and oversee the natural environment. However, it provided 'minimal to no insight into the accomplishments or shortcomings of rural proofing' (Jones, 2022). A second report (DEFRA, 2022) was published soon after. This asserted DEFRA's capacity to provide an evidence-based depiction towards understanding what levelling up (as per the Levelling up United Kingdom white paper; UK Government, 2022) might entail in rural areas and to serve as a foundation for forthcoming





priorities. DEFRA has developed, for example, guidance and training materials for civil servants for incorporating rural proofing in policies, to be hosted on the Civil Service Learning platform (DEFRA, 2022). Nevertheless, in its key observations, the Rural Services Network (RSN) notes that while the 2022 report provides an ‘honest analysis’ of the rural context, it does not provide any evidence to show if rural proofing processes have been followed (Rural Services Network, 2022). More specific guidance has been produced for example by Rural England, an independent research body, and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care to help the health and care sector to address the needs of rural populations in developing or reviewing strategies, initiatives and service delivery plans (Rural England, 2020).

Concerning the [Government’s Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill](#), which aims to support the government’s commitment to reducing geographical disparities between different parts of the UK by spreading opportunities more equally (UK Parliament, 2023), the issue of rural proofing has re-emerged as a priority. When the Bill was discussed at the House of Lords in July 2023, the Lords agreed that the Bill needs rural proofing (Rural Services Network, 2023). This led to [amendment 10](#), mandating the government to publish, alongside its mission statement, a rural proofing report detailing how levelling-up missions influence rural areas and cater to the requirements of rural communities.

3.1.2 Institutional responsibilities

Regarding the roles and responsibilities for rural proofing, there have been changes in the institutional context since the inception of the concept. At the national level, **DEFRA oversees rural proofing** across the government, working closely with other departments on the development of policies that are likely to affect (or that are intended to support) rural areas (DEFRA, 2020). DEFRA’s work entails the promotion of rural proofing through, e.g., guidance, training, workshops, research, statistics, and regular meetings with departments. They are also involved in promoting rural proofing at the ministerial level, e.g., through its representation in various cabinet committees (DEFRA, 2022). However, DEFRA is limited for example in terms of sanctioning departments. Moreover, they have limited internal research capacity, leading them to rely largely on national statistics with limited geographical granularity. At the national level, other departments have commonly associated ‘anything rural’ with DEFRA, which makes it difficult to promote a more holistic approach across the government. For this reason, Lord Cameron of Dillington suggested in his independent review closer working with the Cabinet Office to strengthen and improve rural proofing guidance and Lord Foster of Bath recommended the implementation of a cross-government strategy on rural proofing to make the commitment more mandatory.

In terms of ensuring governmental commitment, all proposals need to undergo a cross-governmental clearing process, which entails obtaining unanimous agreement from all cabinet members. Within this framework, DEFRA assumes the responsibility of flagging proposals that could potentially yield detrimental outcomes for rural communities. Furthermore, it assesses whether the proposed delivery mechanisms adequately consider the intricacies of rural implementation. The cross-government clearance process serves as a vital safeguard, ensuring that policies and initiatives are effectively scrutinised and aligned with the needs and realities of rural regions in England. Critics might argue that, aside from the potential slowness of the process, the mechanism’s effectiveness relies on the perspectives and expertise of DEFRA. If DEFRA’s





assessments are not sufficiently thorough or are biased in any way, the process could fail to accurately identify the adverse effects on rural communities.

Strategic governance on rural proofing is provided by the Rural Affairs Board, which meets on a regular basis to discuss issues affecting rural areas. The Rural Affairs Board is chaired by DEFRA non-executive Director Lizzie Noel (DEFRA, 2020). **Each government Department has a nominated 'rural proofing lead'** who has the role to 'champion' rural proofing in policy development. These leads meet as a network with the aim of sharing best practice, identifying common issues and helping to steer work on rural proofing (DEFRA, 2020). One of the problems is that the individual leads represent very different levels of seniority and expertise in rural issues, which in turn can affect the department's overall commitment to rural proofing.

In addition, policy teams in all Departments are expected to seek out and engage with rural stakeholders in line with the following principles (DEFRA, 2020):

- Involve rural stakeholders as partners early in the policy development process and maintain a dialogue throughout;
- Share as much information as possible, including about policy objectives, costing assumptions, approaches to efficiency and the scope for change;
- Engage with both national and local stakeholders: a place-based approach is often more appropriate as rural areas can differ significantly from one another.

As an example, DEFRA established a **Rural Impacts Stakeholder Forum (RISF)** in March 2020 to promote regular (weekly or monthly) dialogue between key rural stakeholder organisations (e.g. RSN, National Farmers Union, Countryside and Landowners Association, and Rural Coalition) and DEFRA. At the time of establishment, this was specifically focussed on the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities and businesses.

3.1.3 Local level

In the UK the formal commitment to undertake rural proofing applies only to the government Departments at the national level. In the past, DEFRA was also responsible for championing rural proofing across the Government Offices (GOs) in the English regions, until their discontinuation in 2011. The GOs were required to rural proof the activities of other organisations such as the Regional Development Agencies (abolished in 2012) and Regional Assemblies (abolished between 2008-2010) (Atterton, 2020). Additionally, local authorities were entrusted with rural proofing policies' local delivery, supported by local Rural Community Councils responsible for channelling local perspectives into rural policy formulation (Atterton, 2020). However, this involvement has been largely voluntary, contingent upon the awareness, resources, and capacity of these entities (Atterton, 2020). Given increasing centralisation in England, uncertainties loom over the role, willingness, and capabilities of the local level.

Although other rural actors could enhance the process, they too contend with constraints in time and capacity. For instance, the Regional Rural Affairs Forums, which formerly operated in English regions, provided a platform for diverse rural stakeholders. The RSN continues to represent local authorities at the national level. It is involved in communicating concerns from the ground to the national level and advocating their integration into policies. The RSN emphasise the importance of proximity to local authorities and communities to enable a more comprehensive understanding of rural challenges during policy design.





In practice, experience with rural proofing at the local level has yielded mixed results. A notable factor contributing to this variance is the ambiguity surrounding local authorities' rural proofing obligations, namely whether they should autonomously undertake rural proofing or adhere to the national checklist (Atterton, 2020). This lack of clarity has resulted in inconsistent evidence, potentially undermining the effectiveness of the process.

3.1.4 Good practice examples

Amidst these challenges, there are some good examples of rural proofing. At the local level, certain councils have demonstrated remarkable achievements, such as effectively addressing the demand for affordable housing to cater to local needs. Notably, rural councils often tailor their initiatives based on their distinctive circumstances; for instance, areas with a proliferation of holiday homes and AirBnB rentals concentrate their efforts on mitigating the housing crisis. A vivid illustration emerges in Devon, where a dedicated housing commission was established to tackle the pressing housing issue. Moreover, diverse locales exhibit ingenuity in finding tailored solutions. In Cumbria, a focus on enhancing transportation infrastructure has not only aimed at boosting tourism but also aligning with net zero goals, envisioning improved regional mobility. These compelling examples underscore that, despite the challenges, pockets of excellence in rural proofing emerge at the local level, showcasing the capacity of local authorities to innovatively address specific concerns and contribute to holistic policy outcomes.

There are reported examples of successful rural proofing in policy and departmental implementation (House of Lords, 2019a). The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has demonstrated commitment to robust rural proofing, evident in their approach towards the [Industrial Strategy](#) which they have aligned with rural considerations. Another example that attests to departments heeding rural needs is the [Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review](#) (FTIR) published by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), prioritising expansive fibre deployment to rural regions (House of Lords, 2019a). Additionally, DEFRA has showcased positive endeavours in this realm. Collaborative efforts with various departments underscore a proactive approach, such as partnering with the DCMS on matters of digital connectivity and tourism and collaborating with the Department for Transport (DfT) to enhance transportation accessibility. Noteworthy collaborations extend to areas like housing, planning, and the development of the Shared Prosperity Fund, as fostered through collaboration with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (House of Lords, 2019a). Such instances indicate significant attention to rural business requirements. Nonetheless, while many policies show alignment in areas like broadband expansion, transportation, and education (school policy), the effectiveness of rural proofing can wane when addressing 'fuzzier' or more intangible impacts.

Aside from good examples in departmental implementation, [The Green Book](#) (UK Government, 2022) emerges as a pivotal government tool that influences rural impacts. It constitutes guidance from HM Treasury regarding the assessment of policies, programmes, and projects, offering insights into their evaluation and design, along with instructions for monitoring throughout all phases of implementation. It has facilitated a place-based evaluation, transcending limited cost-value appraisals – which would usually favour councils with more capacity to design a proposal and deliver – for a broader consideration of needs and impacts. However, its potential is contingent upon political will, which remains a crucial driver in realising ambitious and well-rounded policies.





3.1.5 Delivering rural proofing

All policies that are likely to affect (or that are intended to support) rural areas, should go through rural proofing. However, effectively gauging the extent of its implementation poses challenges, primarily due to the absence of systematic monitoring or feedback on the impacts of rural proofing (House of Lords, 2019b). In the past, the Countryside Agency/Commission for Rural Communities was responsible for independent reporting and monitoring on rural proofing activity. However, the Agency became part of Natural England in 2006 and its research and policy functions was integrated into the Commission for Rural Communities, which was itself later abolished in 2013. Presently, DEFRA has assumed the responsibility of annual reporting on rural proofing. While it seeks to provide an evidence-based panorama of rural proofing across government departments, its efficacy is compromised by several challenges. Government departments display reticence in disclosing the extent of their adherence or lack thereof to rural proofing principles. DEFRA, on its part, avoids using the annual report as a means of highlighting non-compliance. Consequently, due to these constraints within the realm of monitoring and reporting, a comprehensive evaluation of which policies have undergone rural proofing and to what depth remains elusive.

On the matter of local level delivery and rural stakeholder engagement, the magnitude of the rural populace, greater in number than that of Greater London (DEFRA, 2021b), should ideally translate into a robust voice. Yet its dispersed nature often undermines this influence. This dynamic potentially underpins the observed challenges in implementing effective rural proofing mechanisms.

A crucial dichotomy also emerges concerning the focus on outcomes versus impacts within rural proofing reports. In the evolution of rural proofing in England, DEFRA has first emphasised outcomes, then impacts, and is currently recommitting to the focus on outcomes. This contrasts with observations that government reports lack comprehensive considerations of policies' differentiated impacts on rural areas. A fundamental gap thus persists between policy formulation and the specific needs and realities of rural contexts.

The effectiveness of rural proofing hinges on the availability of timely, granular data to inform policy decisions. This challenge is underscored by a recent report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRA) revealing the link between under-reported rural deprivation and compromised mental well-being (EFRA, 2023). The report highlights a mismatch between mental health policies and rural realities, urging DEFRA and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLHC) to revise indices like the Index of Multiple Deprivation for more accurate rural representation (EFRA, 2023). The RSN actively contributes to this discourse by conducting rural lens reviews of significant governmental policies, highlighting key issues, and identifying aspects overlooked from a rural standpoint (e.g., [Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit](#)). DEFRA also acknowledges that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to rural proofing guidance might not suffice, emphasizing contextualized policy delivery based on different departmental objectives.

The limitations in the existence and availability of rural statistics, exemplified by DEFRA's limited rural team, constrained research budget and reliance on national data, underscore the need for enhanced data infrastructure. This shortage of data also impacts evaluation processes, echoing the significance of robust statistical evidence. DEFRA's current role in self-reporting and reviewing also raises concerns about potential biases in the process. Introducing an independent evaluator could thus be of value, a role that could be assumed by one or several of the strong rural research





centres in England, echoing the academic panel that previously advised DEFRA (DEFRA, 2021a). While this academic collaboration led to research studies further work, it has still been potentially underutilised, when this research strength could bolster DEFRA's limited research capacity.

The implementation of rural proofing extensively relies on the utilisation of checklists (Cookson, 2008; Jones, 2022). The 2008 independent Rural Proofing Review remarked that while these checklists are valuable, they are insufficient in isolation (Cookson, 2008). Critiques further suggest that these checklists might often devolve into mere 'tick-a-box' exercises (Atterton, 2020; House of Lords, 2019b). Aside from implementing more tailored departmental guidance depending on policy objectives, an alternative perspective on enhancing the efficacy of rural proofing involves empowering local communities, related with redistributing responsibilities from the national level to the local level for a place-based approach. Rather than introducing an additional layer of bureaucracy, this perspective lies in leveraging the mechanisms already in place to achieve more robust rural proofing outcomes. This calls for a delicate balance between central oversight and local agency to ensure that rural proofing is not merely a procedural exercise but genuinely enhances policies' resonance with local contexts.

While England's early introduction of rural proofing marked a significant step, the subsequent evolution of this practice in other parts of the UK, such as Scotland with its explicit commitment and comprehensive rural development delivery plan, Northern Ireland's enshrined legislative approach, and Wales' implementation of a rural proofing checklist, has revealed it has remained relatively 'stuck' and has had little advancement. Challenges persist in delivering effective rural proofing within England itself. Acknowledging that rural proofing has historically been process-focused, the emphasis is now shifting towards a more outcome-driven approach, coupled with a local focus (Rewhorn, 2019). This resonates with sentiments underlining the need for a holistic perspective that considers rural contexts beyond isolated policies.

Looking forward, availability of funding is a pivotal concern. England's Rural England Prosperity Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund, while offering support, are bound by time constraints, prompting calls for longer-term funding solutions. Efforts to navigate these challenges involve collaboration within the multi-level government structure, as programs like LEADER funding are phased out and engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships is reshaped. As rural proofing matures, it could develop from a mainly voluntary national policy process to an outcome-driven, locally-rooted cross-governmental strategy.





3.2 The Finland case study

Table 4: Summary of Rural Proofing mechanisms in Finland

Rural proofing in Finland	
When was rural proofing introduced?	Is it mandatory?
In the 2007 when Rural Policy Cooperation Group (YTR) and Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities appointed a working group to prepare rural proofing approach into Finnish structures.	Rural Proofing in Finland is voluntary, with no legal obligation for its implementation. Voluntary approach offers flexibility but also raises concerns about consistency in addressing rural needs. Discussions in the Finnish Parliament suggest an interest in making Rural Proofing a legally mandated process
Responsible institutions?	
National level	Rural Policy Council (MANE) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). The Rural Policy Council has been a driving force behind the implementation of Rural Proofing and plays a central role in steering rural policy development. MAF has actively supported the integration of Rural Proofing into various government departments and offices. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLR) has also endorsed and recommended the use of Rural Proofing, particularly in the context of municipal restructuring and other local policy initiatives.
Sub-national level (regional and municipal level in Finland)	Rural Proofing has evolved with a focus on participatory planning. While lacking a legal mandate, it is endorsed by various governmental bodies, including the Finnish Government, Parliament, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA). However, its voluntary nature leads to concerns about consistency. Rural Proofing has primarily applied in municipal mergers and regional reform scenarios. Its political nature means that its implementation can be influenced by changing political dynamics. Finland's diverse rural landscapes present challenges in tailoring the assessment process. Rural Proofing's application varies across different policy areas, resulting in disparities. Efforts are





	being made to formalise Rural Proofing in legislation, recognizing its importance in addressing rural disparities effectively. Balancing centralisation and local autonomy, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and adapting Rural Proofing as an outcome-driven, locally-rooted approach are key challenges for the future.
What policies are included?	At what stage of policy process is it applied?
<p>In Finland, Rural Proofing is a political commitment to assess policy impact, particularly during municipal restructuring. Local communities, local authorities, and diverse rural landscapes present challenges. Formalisation into legislation is being discussed in the Parliament.</p> <p>Rural Proofing plays a vital role in ensuring equitable service provision at the regional level. Its structured approach covers six thematic areas to comprehensively evaluate policy impact on rural livelihoods, expertise, housing, accessibility, attractiveness, and community cohesion, promoting resilience and vitality in rural communities.</p>	Rural Proofing in Finland is primarily applied in the pre-assessment stage of the policy process. It is a voluntary process that focuses on assessing the impact of policies on rural areas before decisions are made.
Is there guidance for implementation?	What is the methodology?
Finland offers guidance for implementing Rural Proofing.	Rural Proofing in Finland is a participatory and voluntary methodology that assesses policy impacts on rural communities. It employs a structured checklist with six thematic areas and flexible application. This approach aims to effectively address rural disparities. It is now under consideration for formalization into legislation, highlighting its growing significance in policymaking.
What are the measures included in the delivery of rural proofing?	
Measures included in the delivery of rural proofing in Finland involve a structured and comprehensive approach, driven by key organizations and bodies at the national level, including the Rural Policy Council, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.	





What are the main products of rural proofing?

The main products of rural proofing in Finland involve assessing and addressing the impact of policies on rural communities. This process encompasses the evaluation of policies in various dimensions of rural life, including rural livelihoods, expertise, housing and services, accessibility, attractiveness factors, and community cohesion. The aim is to ensure that policies consider and value rural perspectives, rectify structural disparities between rural and urban areas, and promote fairness among people and regions.

In Finland, the development of Rural Proofing (Maaseutuvaikutusten arviointi) has followed a trajectory influenced by principles of participatory planning. While the country lacks a precise legislative mandate for rural proofing, various governmental bodies, including the Finnish Government, Parliament, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA), have endorsed the concept. However, unlike some other countries where Rural Proofing is backed by robust legislative frameworks, Finland's commitment to Rural Proofing is primarily political rather than legal. This distinction has implications for the consistency and scope of its application.

3.2.1 Evolution of rural proofing in Finland

Rural Proofing in Finland, which has its roots dating back to around 2007, gained recognition within the policy landscape by incorporating research knowledge, cross-sectoral collaboration, and a participatory process. Drawing inspiration from the OECD's rural policy framework initiated in 2006, this approach has been refined and integrated with elements from various international models (Åström & Kuhmonen 2016). The National Rural Policy, overseen by both the previous Rural Policy Cooperation Group (YTR) and the current Rural Policy Council (MANE), has guided research and developmental efforts on Rural Proofing in Finland, supported by a robust partnership with the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities since 2007, when the Rural Policy Cooperation Group appointed a working group to prepare rural proofing approach into Finnish structures (Muilu & Voutilainen 2021; see also Nordberg 2020).

The purpose of the Rural Proofing has been considered both on government and parliament level. In 2009, the Finnish government recommended in the 5th Rural Policy Programme 'Rural areas and a prosperous Finland' (2009-2013) that the ministries should use rural proofing in preparation of policies and decisions when there are regional impacts emphasising the importance of considering rural perspectives. The Parliament further endorsed this concept in 2010, calling for Rural Proofing as a preliminary step in national decision-making. However, it's essential to note that Rural Proofing in Finland remains voluntary, with no legal obligation for its implementation. This voluntary approach offers flexibility but also raises concerns about consistency in addressing rural needs. Notably, these initiatives have primarily focused on scenarios related to municipal mergers and, more recently, challenges and concerns raised regarding the slow progress of the regional administration reform.

The political nature of Rural Proofing in Finland means that its implementation can be influenced by changing political dynamics and priorities. While political commitment can provide momentum and visibility to the process, it can also lead to fluctuations in attention and resources dedicated to Rural Proofing, depending on the prevailing political climate. At the national level, however, the Rural Proofing process can be said to be overwhelmed and neglected in situations where the





political stakes are high. Furthermore, at both the regional and national levels, reform processes tend to operate primarily at the sectoral level, which can marginalise their impact on regional and local concerns. The competitive nature of regional dynamics and the relationship with the national government often divert attention away from local issues. In short, the local dynamics and needs frequently get overlooked within the complex political-bureaucratic system of administrative reforms.

Finland's rural areas encompass a diverse range of landscapes and communities. From densely forested regions to remote archipelagos and sparsely populated northern areas, each rural area possesses unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities. This diversity is a fundamental aspect of the Finnish rural landscape but also introduces complexities into the Rural Proofing process. One of the significant challenges in implementing the Rural Proofing in Finland lies in tailoring the assessment process to address the specific needs of these diverse rural landscapes (Muilu and Voutilainen 2021). Policies that work for one region may not be suitable for another, necessitating a nuanced approach to Rural Proofing. This challenge underscores the importance of local contextualisation and flexibility within the Rural Proofing framework.

The rural-urban divide, a global challenge, is particularly pronounced in Finland. Urban centers often dominate policy discourse and resource allocation, leaving rural areas grappling with inequitable access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities. Rural Proofing seeks to rectify this imbalance but does so within a complex social and political landscape. Rural Proofing in Finland plays a significant role in considering and mitigating structural disparities between rural and urban areas. By providing a framework for assessing the impact of policies on rural communities, the Rural Proofing aims to ensure that rural perspectives are considered and valued in policymaking. However, this involves challenging pre-existing power dynamics and advocating for rural interests within the broader context of Finnish society.

As reflected on the current context, it's clear that by proactively identifying the impact of regulatory initiatives in rural areas, we can significantly improve the quality of our legislation and ensure its practical effectiveness. This approach not only guarantees that the intended outcomes of the regulatory proposal extend to various regions but also fosters equity among both individuals and different geographic areas. It's worth noting that the consequences of decisions may vary even within rural regions. We may also argue that these outcomes can have direct or indirect repercussions on multiple policy sectors within rural areas. Therefore, when we evaluate the impact on rural communities, there is a possibility to gain valuable insights into the societal and economic implications, considering their distinct perspectives.

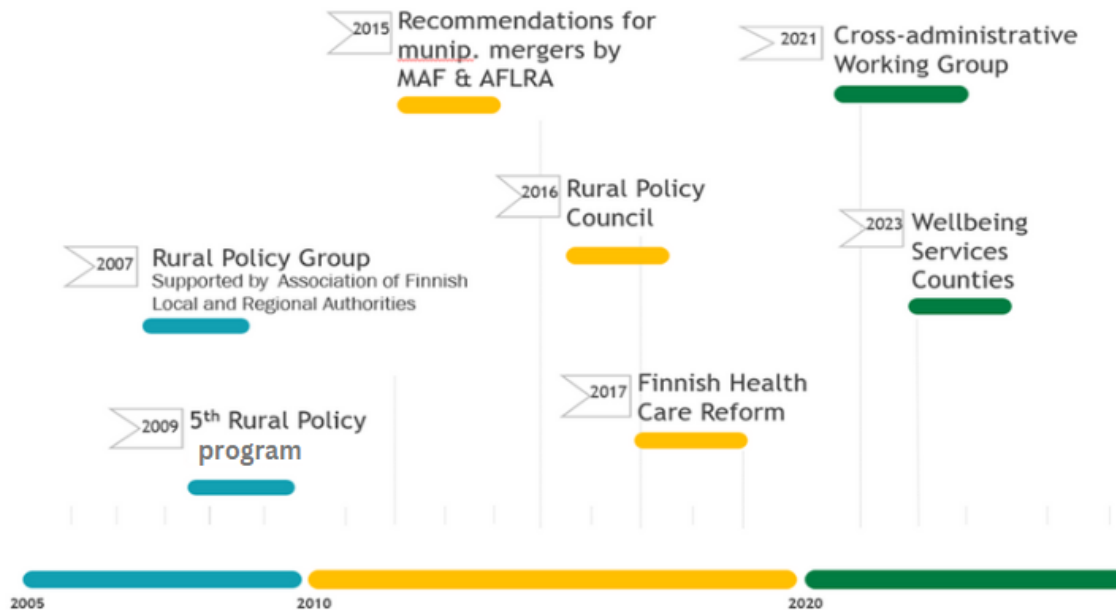
3.2.2 Scope and approach of Rural Proofing

In Finland, the use of Rural Proofing has been primarily focused on ex ante assessment of various processes. This has been justified by its ability to enable proactiveness and necessary adjustments before decision-making (Åström & Kuhmonen 2016). Rural Proofing has been applied before 2020, primarily in the context of municipal mergers, to ensure the equitable consideration of rural areas in decision-making processes, particularly during such consolidation efforts. This approach has aimed to address the specific needs and concerns of rural communities in the face of structural changes in local governance. These steps are illustrated in the figure 3.





Figure 3: Key steps in Finnish Rural Proofing



In a pilot project during the preparation phase of the Finnish regional and healthcare reform in 2017 and 2018, Rural Proofing was utilised to identify potential effects on rural areas, such as the availability of healthcare services, employment, and regional vitality. Rural Proofing aided decision-makers in considering the needs and challenges of rural areas in the reform planning, and thereby promoting sustainable regional development and balanced change. The pilot project was conducted in two different regions (Pirkanmaa and Kainuu) and provided valuable insights into how Rural Impact Assessment can be adapted to the specific needs and conditions of different areas. The results helped fine-tune the plans for the regional and healthcare reform to align with the unique requirements and opportunities of each region.

A new step in Finnish Rural proofing was taken in 2021 when Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry established the Cross-administrative Working Group with the aim of developing guidelines for assessing rural impacts in government proposal preparations. The Working group defined that the purpose of the Rural Proofing is to improve the quality of decision-making. The Rural Proofing helps identify the effects in rural areas: what impact does the proposal have on people living in rural areas permanently and part-time, businesses, rural livelihoods, and their structures, as well as their interrelationships? Special attention should be paid to the effects on sparsely populated rural areas (Husberg et al. 2022). The new Rural Proofing guidance supports both the legislators and decision-makers in identifying and assessing the societal and human impacts on rural areas. However, it is important to note that rural proofing remains advisory and is not a legally binding requirement.

The Finnish Rural Proofing model stands out for its structured and comprehensive approach. *Structured approach* of Rural Proofing in Finland utilises a checklist that covers six thematic





areas, each accompanied by specific evaluation questions. These thematic areas encompass rural livelihoods, expertise, housing and services, accessibility, attractiveness factors, and community cohesion. The structured approach ensures that Rural Proofing covers a wide range of rural aspects comprehensively. It facilitates a systematic evaluation of policies' impact on various dimensions of rural life, making the assessment more holistic.

Rural Proofing can be applied at different *application stages*: stages of policymaking, including pre-assessment, implementation evaluation, and final evaluation. This comprehensive approach ensures that the impact of policies on rural areas is thoroughly considered throughout the policy lifecycle. The flexibility in applying Rural Proofing at different stages acknowledges that the impact of policies evolves over time. It allows for ongoing assessment and adjustment, ensuring that policies remain responsive to changing rural needs.

In recent developments, Finland has recognised the need to integrate Rural Proofing into key legislation, similar to the UK's Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill. The discussions in the Finnish Parliament indicate a growing commitment to formalise Rural Proofing and ensure its consistent implementation in policymaking (Husberg et al. 2022). While this move signifies progress, it also raises questions about the balance between centralisation and local autonomy. The formalisation of Rural Proofing into legislation represents a significant step toward institutionalising the process. However, finding the right balance between centralised oversight and local flexibility is crucial to ensure that Rural Proofing remains responsive to the unique needs of diverse rural communities (Muilu et al. 2013; Nordberg 2019).

In conclusion, Finland's journey with Rural Proofing has been marked by political commitment but lacks legislative backing, resulting in uneven application and varying outcomes. Recent developments indicate a renewed interest in formalising and strengthening the Rural Proofing process to address rural disparities effectively. However, questions about transparency, accountability, and the integration of rural perspectives into policymaking persist.

3.2.3 Institutional responsibilities at national and local level

The Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) played a pivotal role in championing Rural Proofing. The previous Rural Policy Cooperation Group (YTR) and the current Rural Policy Council (MANE) in the MAF have guided research and developmental efforts on Rural Proofing in Finland. They have actively sought to integrate Rural Proofing into the policymaking processes of various government departments and offices. However, the impact of this endeavour was mixed, with several challenges identified. One of the key challenges was the need for effective coordination and communication between MAF and other government bodies. The success of Rural Proofing hinges on its integration into various policy domains and achieving this requires collaboration and buy-in from multiple stakeholders. The extent to which this collaboration occurs has impacted the overall effectiveness of Rural Proofing. The experiences from the Rural Proofing process can serve as a bridge for better coordination between Rural Policy and other government bodies, addressing one of its key challenges. These insights can also inform targeted rural development initiatives and raise awareness of rural issues, ultimately enhancing the overall effectiveness of Rural Proofing.

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and the Rural Policy Council recommended the use of Rural Proofing in municipal structural changes in 2015, and in the same





year, the Rural Policy Council and AFLRA produced a guide that emphasised the utilisation of the Rural Proofing in the planning and implementation of the regional reform (Husberg 2014). Both sources highlighted that the Rural Proofing provides a comprehensive approach to evaluating and planning local and regional changes, which can be particularly valuable for the development of municipalities and regions. Both publications were a step towards broader acceptance of Rural Proofing and its integration into municipal decision-making, which can have a positive impact on the vitality and sustainable development of local communities.

Finnish Rural Proofing has developed its own institutional framework tailored to the country's specific needs and context. At the national level, several key organisations and bodies are responsible for driving and facilitating the Rural Proofing process (Maaseutupolitiikka.fi 2019).

Rural Policy Council (MANE) has been the driving-force behind the implementation of Rural Proofing in Finland. The Rural Policy Council plays a central role in steering rural policy development and promoting the utilisation of Rural Proofing as an essential tool in the policymaking process. The Council's role in advocating for Rural Proofing demonstrates the commitment of Finnish authorities to ensure rural concerns are integrated into policymaking. It underscores the importance of having a dedicated body focused on rural development and impact assessment. We may also argue that Rural Proofing appears to be a vital part of rural policy, but its implementation requires resources and various forms of collaboration among different stakeholders.

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and Rural Policy Council have been instrumental in producing guidelines, recommendations, and advocating for the method's use in rural policymaking. The involvement of the MAF highlights the cross-sectoral nature of Rural Proofing. It emphasises that Rural Proofing is not limited to a single ministry or domain but should be integrated across various sectors, reflecting the interconnectedness of rural development. (Maaseutupolitiikka.fi 2019).

AFLR (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities) has endorsed and recommended the use of Rural Proofing, particularly in the context of municipal restructuring and other local policy initiatives (Kuntaliitto et al. 2016). Their support highlights the importance of Rural Proofing in local governance and policymaking, especially during significant structural changes. AFLR's involvement underscores the need for collaboration between national and local levels of governance. It acknowledges that Rural Proofing is not solely a top-down process but should involve local authorities and communities to be effective.

One of the persistent challenges has been the lack of a mandate for local authorities and public bodies to implement Rural Proofing in their local policies. This gap has resulted in limited compliance and uneven integration of rural considerations into local decision-making processes. Local authorities are often the entities responsible for implementing and delivering policies at the community level. Without a clear mandate or obligation to consider rural impacts, these authorities may not prioritise rural concerns in their decision-making processes. This can lead to disparities in how Rural Proofing is applied across different regions and localities.

During the 2010s (Husberg 2013; Muilu et al. 2013), Finland witnessed significant municipal amalgamations aimed at creating larger, more efficient municipalities. The use of Rural Proofing in municipal restructuring demonstrates the adaptability of the ex-ante impact assessment





methodology to address unique challenges. It showcases Rural Proofing's relevance not only in regular policymaking but also in times of significant administrative changes. This included evaluating changes in services, accessibility, community cohesion, and the overall well-being of rural residents. Rural Proofing also helped ensure that resources were allocated equitably in the newly formed municipalities, considering the specific needs and challenges of rural regions. Besides, it also played a role in determining the best governance structures and decision-making processes for the amalgamated municipalities, particularly regarding rural representation and influence.

The multifaceted role of Rural Proofing in municipal restructuring highlights its versatility in addressing complex issues. It demonstrates how Rural Proofing can contribute to ensuring that restructuring processes are fair, transparent, and considerate of rural interests. While the primary commitment to Rural Proofing lies at the national level, local authorities and other local stakeholders have been encouraged to engage voluntarily in rural policy development and the Rural Proofing process during municipal restructuring. However, their participation varies based on local awareness, resources, and capacity. Encouraging local involvement recognises that Rural Proofing isn't solely a top-down process but should involve the active engagement of local stakeholders. It promotes a bottom-up approach where communities have a say in shaping policies that affect them.

3.2.4 Delivering Rural Proofing

While the application of Rural Proofing in Finland has made significant strides, it has not been without its challenges. These challenges must be acknowledged and addressed as Finland looks to the future application of Rural Proofing.

The Rural Proofing has been applied unevenly across different policy areas in Finland, leading to varying outcomes and effectiveness. While some sectors may witness a meticulous application of Rural Proofing, others might experience less rigorous assessments, resulting in disparities in policy impacts on rural communities. This uneven application can be attributed to several factors, including the differing levels of awareness and prioritisation of rural issues within different government departments. As a result, some policies may undergo more thorough Rural Proofing, while others receive limited attention, potentially leaving certain rural areas and sectors at a disadvantage.

The tension between centralisation and localisation remains an ongoing debate in Rural Proofing. Striking the right balance is crucial for ensuring that Rural Proofing remains effective and relevant across Finland's diverse rural landscape. This requires continued collaboration between national-level authorities, municipalities, and local stakeholders to tailor impact assessments to the specific needs of each region.

New challenge for implementation of the Rural Proofing is the reorganisation of public healthcare, social welfare, and rescue services. Responsibility for organising these services was transferred from municipalities to the Wellbeing Services Counties at the beginning of 2023. The key objective of the reform is to improve the availability and quality of basic public services throughout Finland. The reform includes fostering partnerships with research institutions and encouraging community-driven data collection initiatives. The reorganisation of healthcare, social welfare, and rescue services represents the most profound change ever in the Finnish administrative structure,





requiring necessary adjustments in service provision structures in rural areas. This, in turn, necessitates the implementation of Rural Proofing.

The Wellbeing Services Counties have been advised to implement Rural Proofing as recommended by MAF (Husberg et al. 2023). This Rural Proofing, as outlined in the guide, is not exhaustive and does not consider all perspectives from rural areas point of view. However, its purpose is to draw attention in decision-making to factors that may affect the overall impact on rural areas. In addition to rural impacts, it is also essential to consider all other effects of the restructuring of services, as a negative impact on rural areas could be positive for the Wellbeing Services Counties. It is also important to keep in mind that even significant structural changes, when leveraged appropriately in the area, can provide opportunities for diversifying the economic structure of rural areas and the development of small businesses. Often, the most substantial structural changes might also create opportunities for innovation and the development of services beyond those required by the healthcare and social services sector.

Rural stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and civil society organisations, play a pivotal role in shaping the Rural Proofing process. However, their influence is not uniform across all regions. Dispersed populations in sparsely populated rural areas often face challenges in mobilising and advocating for their interests. Efforts should be made to empower and support rural communities, businesses, and civil society organisations, particularly in sparsely populated areas, to advocate for their interests effectively. This can involve capacity-building initiatives and resource allocation to support active participation in the Rural Proofing process. Moreover, the capacity and resources available to rural stakeholders can vary significantly. While some regions benefit from active, well-organised advocacy groups, others struggle to assert their concerns effectively. Bridging these disparities in stakeholder engagement poses an additional layer of complexity in Rural Proofing.

As Rural Proofing continues to evolve from primarily being a procedural exercise to becoming an outcome-driven, locally-rooted approach, Finland must ensure that this transition is managed effectively. Continuous capacity building and knowledge dissemination at various levels of governance will be essential to keep Rural Proofing adaptable and aligned with changing rural realities. This evolution reflects a growing recognition of the need for a more holistic perspective that considers the diverse needs of rural areas. However, this evolution introduces its own set of challenges. Ensuring that Rural Proofing remains adaptable while maintaining its core principles necessitates careful calibration.

Recognising the need to integrate Rural Proofing into key legislation, the question is, if Finland is moving towards formalising Rural Proofing. This transition signifies a growing commitment to making Rural Proofing a legally mandated process, ensuring its consistent implementation in policymaking. The discussions in the Finnish Parliament indicate a recognition of Rural Proofing's importance in addressing rural disparities effectively. Its journey from inception to becoming a vital instrument in rural development underscores the dynamism and adaptability of Finland's policymaking landscape. As rural proofing continues to evolve, it holds the potential to reshape the future of rural communities in Finland, promoting their resilience and vitality.





3.3 The USA case study

Table 5: Summary of Rural Proofing mechanisms in the USA

Rural proofing in the USA	
When was rural proofing introduced?	Is it mandatory?
There is no proper rural proofing mechanism envisaged in the USA, however a similar mechanism has been introduced in 2018 to tackle a severe drug addiction crisis, particularly challenging in rural areas	It is a political rather than a legislative commitment, and it is not mandatory.
Responsible institutions?	
National level	The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) of the White House develops Federal drug policy and coordinate its implementation across the Federal Government.
Sub-national level	No mandatory responsibilities at the sub-national level are envisaged. However, local community leaders are prompted to make use of the federal tools made available to increase knowledge on the root causes and scope of the opioid crisis and on funding available at federal level to be used to tackle the opioid crisis in rural areas.
What policies are included?	At what stage of policy process is it applied?
There is no formal commitment and no Federal Government official policy position, Policy areas potentially involved may vary according to local specificity and to local leader decisions. Federal Departments involved are: US Department of Agriculture, US Department of Health and Human Services, US Department of Justice.	Local action steps are intended to take place during policy implementation, but since it is left to the decision of local leaders, they might also not be applied.
Is there guidance for implementation?	What is the methodology?
There is a Rural Community Action Guide developed in 2019	The Guide does not propose a methodology. It provides an overview of key challenges and showcases some examples of local actions.





What are the measures included in the delivery of rural proofing?

The US process is aimed to educate local communities to consider key challenges and viable solutions. No delivery measures are included. Information provided in the guides and within the operational tools are not to be intended as Federal Government's position or as an endorsement of a certain type of local practices.

What are the main products of rural proofing?

No product is envisaged

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on information gathered in the US Department of Agriculture website dealing with opioid misuse in rural America <https://www.usda.gov/topics/opioids>

3.3.1 The evolution of rural proofing mechanism in the USA

There is no proper rural proofing mechanism envisaged in the USA, however a similar approach was introduced in 2018 to tackle a public health emergency that has been hitting the entire country since 1999. The approach adopted in the USA is very different and simpler in comparison to the European "rural proofing", however its inner essence is more or less the same and it resulted in a set of strategic operating tools aimed at improving coordination of available funds at federal and local level so to complement the 2019 National Drug Control Strategy aimed at reducing illegal drugs availability and use.

The USA, in fact, have been experiencing for two decades the emergency of the severe [opioid crisis](#), characterised by an exponential growth in drug overdose deaths due to an increase of both prescriptions of opioid painkillers and illicitly trafficked substances. After a temporary small decline in numbers around the years 2016-2017, the situation worsened in the Covid period (+31% only between 2019 and 2020) and continued to increase in the following years (more than 200 deaths per day in 2021) (Hedegaard et al., 2020).

Actually, it was not just a crisis of health that was going on. It was instead a generalised crisis of rural areas, a crisis of opportunities. But the special focus on rurality, rural needs and coordination of actors/policies has emerged particularly for merit of the expertise acquired within the OECD and sensitivity towards these issues of the chair of the **Technical Expert Panel (TEP)**.

The opioid crisis was, in fact, particularly pervasive in rural areas. Between 1999 and 2015 deaths due to drug overdose increased by 325% in rural counties and by 198% in metropolitan areas. Moreover, as found out in a [survey](#) commissioned by the American Farm Bureaus Federation and the National Farmers Union and as reported by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention⁴ (CDC), in 2017 opioid misuse impacted on almost 50% of rural adults and 74% of farmers and drug-related deaths in rural areas surpassed those in urban areas.

This crisis urged the US Federal Government to mobilise a huge number of public resources to address and curtail the problem and to understand root causes and dynamics, assess the different local needs and make decisions on specific service priorities.

For this purpose, in May 2018 the **Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)** of the White House set up the **Rural Opioid Federal Interagency Working Group (IWG)** aimed to identify viable actions to undertake to support rural America in dealing with the drug emergency by improving





coordination in addressing the drug emergency and reducing the overlap of federal responses. The IWG is co-chaired by the ONDCP and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and has as members the US Departments of Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labour, Transportation and Veteran Affairs, the Appalachian Regional Commission, AmeriCorps, and the Federal Communications Commission. However, in this regard, it has to be underlined that at present the US Departments still involved are only three: Agriculture, Health and Human Services and Justice.

The activities of the IWG were financed with resources released by the Congress and followed a series of steps. The Department of Agriculture listed rural areas by zip code so to frame the situation and have the elements to design a viable strategic approach and then, based on this zip codes list, the Federal Departments and Agencies identified all funding schemes and resources conveyed in those areas. As a further measure, the IWG carried out around **25 listening sessions** (town hall meetings) in small towns across the country with community groups composed of federal employees, urban experts and local leaders, with the aim of empowering local communities in the understanding of the scope of the problem, in the comprehension and use of the tools being devised to tackle the ongoing health crisis, and in considering all possible vulnerability factors, not only health services but also transport, roads, housing, e-connectivity, etc.

Thanks to the work of the IWG it was evidenced that whereas most deaths were in rural areas (where also persistent poverty is predominantly present) not enough resources nor adequate medical care and training were reaching the same areas. And it emerged also that this situation did not stem from funding calls of US Departments/Agencies not prioritising rural areas; potential beneficiaries envisaged were, in fact, the underserved/persistently poor/hard-to-reach population, usually living in rural areas. The main issue was, instead, that, since information and data were dispersed across a multitude of governmental websites, it was not easy for rural communities to assess properly their needs, to design a coherent strategy to meet them and to promptly apply to calls and access available and suitable funding opportunities.

To overcome the poor awareness of needs and the mismatch between needs and resources in rural areas, the IWG recommended the Federal Government to improve information flow and statistical basis by setting up **a single access point** to all relevant heterogeneous information, a user-friendly repository to help rural local leaders to access all information and data available, to understand better health needs and treatment services necessary, to learn to prevent drug use, and to timely intercept the calls at federal and national level and catch all funding opportunities from the several Departments potentially useful to address substance use disorders and related issues.

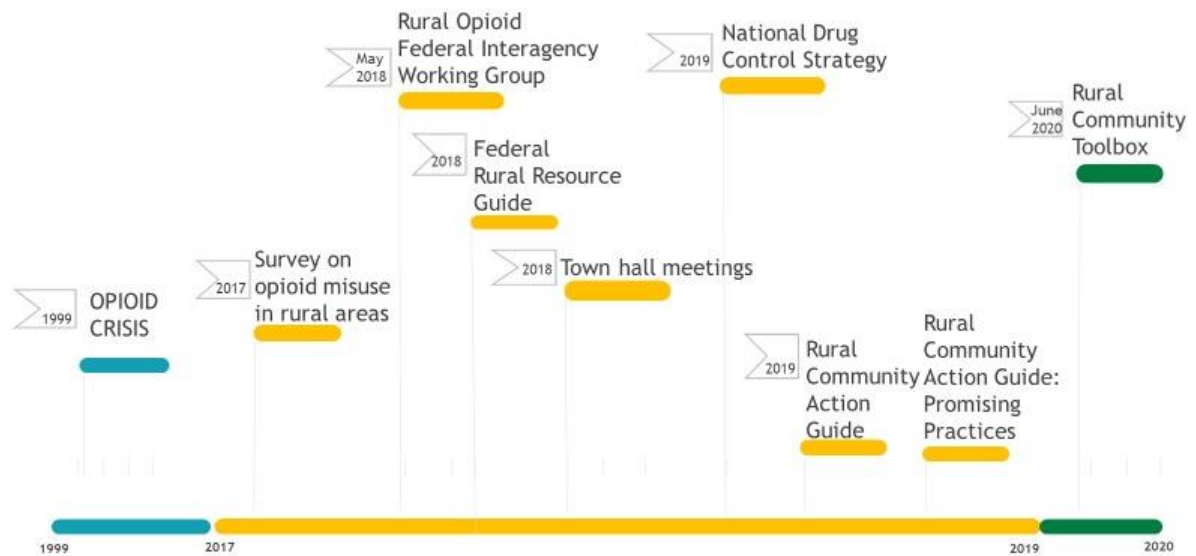
The process implemented in the USA resulted in the release of a Federal Rural Resource Guide (the first in October 2018, and a more recent version in 2021) and the launch in February 2022 of a comprehensive free website, the Rural Community Tool Box. The [Federal Rural Resource Guide](#), compiled by IWG, lists under 48 overarching categories all the federal programmes and resources potentially useful to help rural communities to tackle Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) and opioid misuse made available by US Departments and Agencies. The [Rural Community Tool Box](#) represents the interactive online version of the Federal Rural Resource Guide and contains the most up-to-date information on all federal fundings and tools to build healthy drug-free rural





communities. In particular, it gathers information and data concerning different topics, such as fundings accessible to communities, treatment options and services, information on Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) and opioids, technical assistance and training to develop skills to address SUDs, and provides, therefore, a federal practical guidance to implement community social change and has the mission of promoting rural community health and development.

Figure 4: Evolution of Rural Proofing in the USA



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on information gathered in the US Department of Agriculture website dedicated to the opioid misuse in rural America <https://www.usda.gov/topics/opioids>

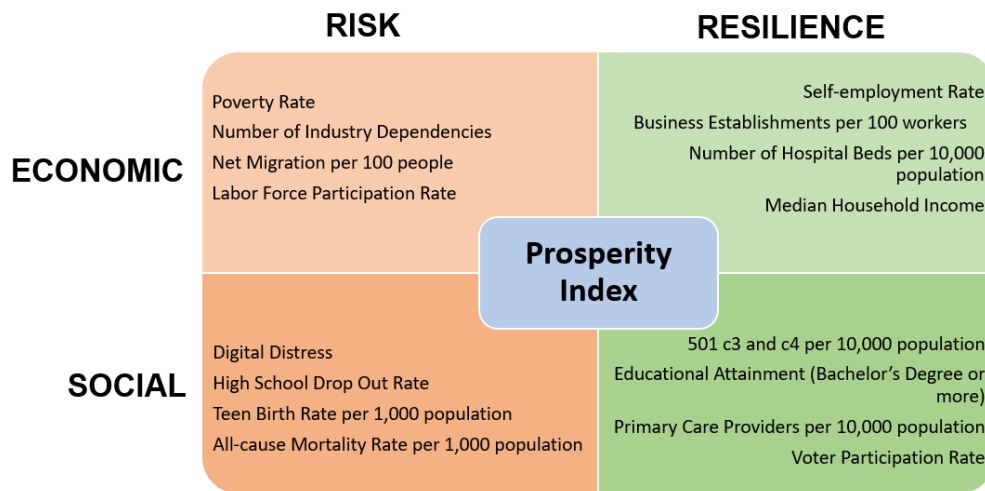
Within the Rural Community Assessment tool there is also an interactive data tool aimed at empowering community leaders in the assessment of causes and impacts of opioid misuse in their territory: the [Opioid Misuse Community Assessment Tool](#). This tool provides information and data from different sources at federal level and makes them easily usable. Data are aggregated in 5-year tranches (2012-2016) and users' selections are showcased in maps coloured in shades of blue for the different degrees of relationship between drug overdose deaths and a series of socio-demographic, economic and behavioural features (race/ethnicity, age, education, disability status, broadband access, median household income, poverty rate, unemployment rate, injury-prone employment, substance use facilities, mental health facilities). Information are synthesized in a single numerical measure of prosperity ranging from 1 (most prosperous) to 5 (least prosperous) for each county, the **Prosperity Index**¹, that standardises in one value 16 indicators of four specific indicators associated with prosperity at local/county level (Economic Risk, Economic Resilience, Social Risk, Social Resilience).

¹ The Prosperity Index has been created for this specific aim. It provides a single numerical measure designed to reflect the prosperity of a county. For the overall prosperity index score, 1 represents most prosperous counties and 5 represents least prosperous counties. For the component scores, 1 represents lowest risk or highest resilience and a score of 5 represents highest risk or lowest resilience.





Figure 5: Components and indicators of the Prosperity Index



Source: <https://opioidmisusetool.norc.org/>

The federal strategy addressed to reduce drug use and its consequences is complemented also by the [Rural Community Action Guide](#), a report presenting the results of the roundtables and measures put in place by the USDA “to build strong and healthy rural places” and is devised to empower rural communities in the fight against present and future crisis by educating leaders to identify on time vulnerability factors and build responses tailored to meet local needs. In particular, funds were mobilised for three typologies of actions: prevention, treatment and recovery. Moreover, best practices and example cases were made available in the [Rural Community Action Guide: Promising practices](#) that lists by State and topic a great number of activities and projects already put in place that could be replicated or used as inspiration.

3.3.2 Institutional responsibilities

As already highlighted in the previous pages, the US approach introduced to tackle the opioid crisis that affected particularly rural America is not a rural proofing mechanism.

However, it can be thought as a subtle rural proofing approach involving the top and the bottom of the institutional chain. It is, in fact, addressed on one side to sensitise **federal Departments/Agencies** to think rural and to address rural needs, and on the other to educate **local leaders and communities** on becoming aware of their vulnerability and needs and to empower them to catch adequate funding opportunities for the opioid emergency at federal level.

The *Rural Community action Guide* was meant to complement the 2019 National Drug Control Strategy setting federal priorities for reducing drug use and its consequences. Besides law enforcement to reduce illicit drug availability, the effort made aimed at helping both the federal/national level and the local level to intervene in early stages by deciding more flexible and creative strategies addressing drug use. And it helped the Federal Departments to acknowledging the relevant differences occurring at local level and the local community leaders to can refer to identify all the different Departments besides the Department of Agriculture putting resources available to tackle local rural needs, such as the Departments of Health and Human Services, of Justice and many others listed above.





3.3.3 Good practice examples

The IWG analysis highlighted that opioid and other drug addictions were particularly severe in areas where basic services were insufficient to meet local needs and demand. And evidenced also that there is not one single effective response valid for all areas, since assets and critical issues are different.

Therefore, with the objective of supporting local leaders to address the opioid crisis, a large number of insights on promising practices from partners attending the local meetings and action steps are included in the [Rural Community Action Guide](#). In particular, the Guide presents possible action steps to manage the crisis in a more efficient way that are intended **as a roadmap for action in rural America**. Suggestions are arranged in five sequential and interlinked stages aimed to lead local leaders and communities to a collective change in the understanding of the problem and responding to it:

1. **face of addiction** - stories of rural people affected by addiction to showcase that the problem impacts all socioeconomic group; how the fear of stigma may act as a barrier to people's access to treatment services and recovery and possible action steps to combat stigma; use of data to understand drug use disorder;
2. **impact of addition on a rural community** – manage fiscal resources, Increase opportunities for employment and access to Broadband, bridge the Transportation Gap, overcome economic challenges;
3. **prevention** – early prevention and early intervention strategies, community-driven solutions, address substance use disorder in the farming community;
4. **treatment** - strengthen the rural Healthcare Network for persons seeking treatment, understand why Medication Assisted Treatment is different in rural communities, providing treatment and support, Drug Courts;
5. **recovery** – understand how Faith Communities can help rural communities to address Substance Use Disorder, how to build strong recovery communities in rural areas and to mobilize them, how to increase housing options for persons in recovery.

The national and local stakeholders that shared their practices, experiences and solutions in the listening sessions with the IWG and then collected in the *Rural Community Action Guide* are indicated in the following table.

Many other practices, experiences and solutions are listed in the Rural Community Action Guide: Promising Practices supplement that can be accessed [online](#) for additional information and numerous other examples of promising practices may be accessed in the Rural Community Toolbox [webpage](#).

Table 6: Rural Community Action Guide Partners

STAGE	Rural Community Action Guide Partners
Face of Addiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participants to the Addiction Policy Forum • NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis • Move beyond stigma of addiction • Understand Substance Use Disorder and Opioid Use Disorder





Impact of Addiction on a Rural Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Association of Counties • National Association of Development Organizations • Rural Broadband Association • National Rural Transit Assistance Program • Appalachian Regional Commission
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture • Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America • American Farm Bureau Federation • National Farmers Union
Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Rural Health Association • Pew Charitable Trust • National Sheriffs' Association • Center for Court Innovation
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US Department of Agriculture, Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships • National Alliance for Recovery Residences • Faces & Voices of Recovery • Housing Assistance Council

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on "Rural Community Action Guide" (2019) and "Rural Community Action Guide: Promising Practices supplement" (2019)

3.3.4 Delivering rural proofing

All the tools devised in the USA in support of local leaders and public health officials were intended to improve the identification of the root causes of the severe opioid misuse in rural areas. But information and data transcend health and drugs to include all aspects of wellbeing and give a comprehensive socio-economic perspective on the county, allow the understanding of local vulnerabilities and reduce the severity/likelihood of actual/further crises.

Nevertheless, no general scheme is envisaged, local community actions are voluntary, and local leaders have to apply for resources directly from the single Departments or Agencies by participating in different tenders.

The tools present the state of play at county/state/federal level and the measures/resources potentially available, but, since funds are mobilised by every single Department/Agency, every local community/leader has to find its own way to access and to use the resources. Moreover, although every Department/Agency was helped to finalise resources to emergencies, the results of the measures undertaken are not embedded in the policy-making decisions, nor are they used to decide how to allocate funds among policy priorities, and no monitoring or evaluation mechanism is envisaged.

Even though it was the emergency the entry point that draw everybody's attention on rural areas, the strategy and tools implemented were helpful in inspiring/educating policy makers and governments in using funds and policies in rural areas in a synergic way and acting accordingly at local level. But, without a single central authority guiding the process and monitoring and





measuring the outcomes, the risk is that the measures put in place fail to tackle rural needs since they are too dependent on the skills and focus of local leaders.

Additionally, it was possible to mobilise more funding towards rural areas since the IWG could take advantage of the emergency levers already in place. Therefore, despite the higher number of rural counties accessing the federal funds, it remains a unique experiment, limited to the specific emergency occurred and it is hardly replicable. In fact, the reduction of drug misuse risk has reduced also the scope of the mechanism put in place, and at present only the Department of Agriculture and the Departments of Health and Human Services and of Justice continue to implement and use the Rural Community Tool Box.

4. Provision of a methodology of rural proofing for Pilot Regions

4.1 Scope and objectives of RP at the local level

In the previous sections, general considerations have been developed about the RP methodologies in different countries. In particular, these specific cases (England, Finland and USA) have been discussed.

In this section, RP methodological approach and related needs of information will be discussed. The objectives of this proposal must take account of the following aspects:

- a) RP approach should be designed for RUSTIK Pilot Regions, to be applied at local level in the next steps of the project, in parallel with the definition of strategies by living-labs;
- b) RP approach must be applied alongside the exploration of transition challenges and opportunities which the Pilot Regions are developing in their activities. As described hereafter, rural proofing is an approach that allows the investigation of the impact on the single Pilot Region of the relevant policies for the chosen transitions. In this regard, the range of appropriate policies to be assessed can differ from one Pilot Region to another and from one transition to another;
- c) RP supports the experimental phase of living-labs since, at the early stage of the transition challenges/opportunities definition, it allows to improve the strategy design;
- d) As we will see hereafter, RP is not only based on local actors' knowledge and experience but should be accompanied by appropriate evidence-based analysis and collection of data on policy impact in territories of Pilot Regions.

4.2 RP scheme in RUSTIK project

The inclusion of RP principles in RUSTIK work with local actors is similar to experiences already developed in literature concerning the application of RP at local level. In this regard, it is appropriate to give emphasis on a place-based analysis, as developed in the recently published UK Green Book guidance (2022).

Place-based analysis considers the policy appraisal in the more general context design and implementation of programmes/projects and regulatory proposal at different institutional tiers.



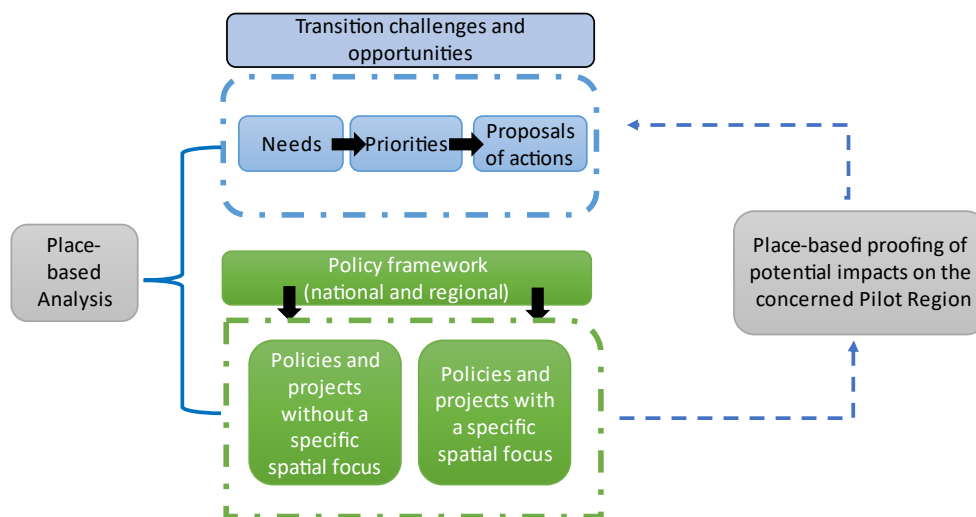


Place-based analysis is required for two broad categories of proposals (UK Green Book, 2022, p. 67):

- a) proposals with an objective that is specific to a particular place or area or type of area;
- b) proposals which do not have geographically defined objectives, but which appear likely to have different implications either positive or negative for specific areas (including rural areas) that decision makers will need to understand and may need to take into account.

The work underway in RUSTIK is focused on the definition of transition challenges and opportunities through a parallel exploration and collection of relevant data at national, regional and local levels to support transformative/adaptive responses to transitions. In fact, exploration and collection of data are included in the process of analysis of needs, definition of priorities and proposals of appropriate actions (figure 6).

Figure 6: A scheme of rural proofing at the local level



2

Source: own authors' elaboration

In this framework, once defined the transition challenges/opportunities Pilot Regions wish to focus on, the proofing activity concerns two types of policies:

- a) policies (and related projects) without a specific focus, but that can have a potential heavy impact on transitions, deemed as significant for the Pilot Region: i.e., new regulatory rules on the use of water for irrigation set at national/regional level; new national/regional programmes for broad-band development in rural areas; new rules for the forest management defined at regional level, etc.
- b) policies and related projects with a specific spatial focus on the Pilot Region, which can support or contrast priorities and proposals of actions elaborated through the living-lab work.





In the former case, proofing should explore complementary and synergic effects with proposals of actions; in the latter case, proofing provides new elements for discussion among living-labs actors and for scrutiny at the local level.

The analysis of two types of policies can be supported by the elements already collected within the WP4 steps, but it must be further complemented in the direction of a process of rural proofing.

The final outcome of a place-based analysis is providing a description of potential impacts, partly evidence-based and partly based on the experience and knowledge of the main local/regional stakeholders.

4.3 A checklist of possible questions

RP is strongly focused on policy assessment, being policies either spatially focused or not. This implies the definition of an appropriate list of questions to be explored and in parallel specific data concerning potential policy effects upon the concerned Pilot Region. The list of relevant questions forming the basis for a place-based analysis are described in boxes 2 and 3, depending on the types of policies considered. These questions reflect the approach adapted by the UK Green Book (2022).

Box 2. Place-Based analysis for Policies/projects without a specific spatial focus on the Pilot Region, but having strong impacts on the transition challenges/opportunities selected by the Pilot Region

Where proposals are not principally focused on the Pilot Region, the potential for place-based impacts should be considered, and a decision taken about whether place-based analysis is required. The following questions should be considered as part of this analysis.

Differential spatial impacts:

- Do you expect impacts to differ significantly in the Pilot Region, compared to other areas?
- What types of effects do you expect occur in the immediate and long term on the Pilot Region?
- Where data is available at the Pilot Region level, can this be presented graphically (i.e., on a map)?
- Where data is not available, can improvements be made to data collection to ensure that it can be provided in future?
- If effects are significant, how can this be built into monitoring and evaluation arrangements?
- In areas experiencing significantly different effects among groups/sectors/types of entrepreneurs/small and medium enterprises/families with different incomes and access to services, etc., if so, there is a need for considering these effects and determine whether action is required as a result?

Alignment with local plans and strategies

- Where impacts are significant, to what extent does the intervention align with wider strategic objectives of the Pilot Region?
- Where impacts are significant, is the intervention dependent on the successful delivery of other interventions in the Pilot Region?



**Box 3. Place-Based analysis for projects with a specific spatial focus on the Pilot Region and transition challenges/opportunities selected by the Pilot Region**

Where the objectives of proposals have a specific spatial focus on the Pilot Region, then place based analysis should be central to the appraisal and advice it supports. The following questions may be considered as part of this analysis.

- Is the action defined by the Living Lab part of a wider programme that has been agreed in principle? If not, are there external dependencies that significantly affect its viability?
- What are the expected effects in the Pilot Region?
- Have other actions been implemented in the past in the Pilot Region and which results have been achieved?
- Are there likely to be unintended negative or positive collateral effects in the Pilot Region or within wider spatial area such as nearby travel to work areas?
- Within the Pilot Region will any of the groups/sectors/types of entrepreneurs/small and medium enterprises/families with different incomes and access to services, etc., be significantly adversely affected by the action proposed? If so, consider these effects, identify significant gaining and losing groups and determine whether action is required as a result.
- Where relevant data is unsatisfactory or unavailable can improvements be made to produce it in the future?

Alignment with local plans and strategies:

- What are the views of local stakeholders?
- To what extent does the proposal align with wider public policy in the Pilot Region and the broader region (NUTS2 or NUTS3)?

Interdependencies with other local or national interventions:

- Is achievement of the proposal's SMART objectives dependent on the successful delivery of other proposals, if so, are they part of the same program? If not, how is this risk being managed.

4.4 Evidence-based analysis based on appropriate data

Trying to respond to these questions requires the following:

- Introducing this list of questions in the subsequent work with Living Labs while they develop the transition challenges/opportunities;
- Planning a desk analysis of the policies/projects that have been recently implemented or underway in the Pilot Region to ensure coverage of those not having a specific spatial focus but having a significant impact on concerned transitions;
- Defining a list of crucial data to support the evidence-based analysis of potential impacts of actions on specific transition challenges/opportunities.





Crucial data cannot be the same for all Pilot Regions. They strongly depend on sectors, types of entrepreneurs, groups of population beneficiaries of the proposed actions, and transition challenges/opportunities considered.

Data needs will be better defined within the process of data experimentation conducted in WP3 and partly in WP2 since some data have already been envisaged and collected in the latter work package.

The rural proofing process, however, needs additional data in policy delivery and spatial analysis of the policy impact, that have not been considered in the project steps conducted until now. In fact, most of the data needs identified by the various WPs concerned the analysis of the Pilot Region's characteristics and transitions.

RP process implies that to know the potential effects of whatever policy, it is crucial to map their spatial distribution on the concerned Pilot Region's territory and reconstruct results indicators based on the EU policies monitoring. The feasibility of this work depends on the availability of data at the regional and local levels. Still, in some Pilot Regions covered by EU policies, the data can be collected through the Managing Authorities of the programmes and Payment Agencies. The knowledge of the spatial distribution of existing policies (only those relevant for the transition challenges/opportunities) is crucial to respond to questions related to the relations of proposed actions with other policy instruments already implemented in the Pilot Region.





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