



# RURAL PROOFING AND THE RURAL CHAMPION

Research and Library Services

The concept of Rural Proofing has become central to the delivery of government policy in rural areas of Northern Ireland – in theory. However, it has become evident that there is confusion about how the rural proofing process should work, where responsibility for it lies, as well as the actual impact it has had on policy delivery in rural areas, with the focus perhaps too much on process than outcomes. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland (DARD) is therefore reviewing its approach to Rural Proofing and is considering the potential role for a Rural Champion in driving rural proofing forward. This paper considers the issues relating to rural proofing and the rural champion concepts.

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## CONTENTS

1.0	Introduction	1
2.0	The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP)	1
3.0	Rural Proofing	2
4.0	Conducting rural proofing	3
5.0	A legislative basis?	4
6.0	DARD and the concept of Rural Champion	5
6.1	Advocate	5
6.1.1	Watchdog/Mainstreamer	6
6.1.2	Listener and Adviser	8
6.1.3	Initiator	9
6.1.4	Exemplar	9
7.0	Conclusion	9

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 aims to protect and enhance the rural environment while also contributing towards the development and success of rural businesses and communities. In keeping with the objectives of Article 4 of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005<sup>1</sup> the Programme will focus on:

- Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector (Axis 1);
- Improving the environment and the countryside (Axis 2);
- The quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy (Axis 3).

Moving in parallel with this programme the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is reviewing its approach to 'rural proofing' and considering the establishment of a 'rural champion' who will advocate at policy level on behalf of rural communities.

Much of the criticism of rural proofing comes from concern that the focus tends to be on process – tick box exercises – and not outcomes. This paper considers existing literature on how rural proofing can move from a process-based concept to an outcomes-based initiative.

## 2. THE NORTHERN IRELAND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (NIRDP)

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan was approved by the European Commission on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2007. It has four key themes<sup>2</sup>:

- Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry by supporting restructuring, development and innovation
- Improving the environment and countryside by supporting land management
- Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of economic activity
- Using a LEADER-type approach

These themes mirror those of the DARD Rural Strategy 2007-2013 and indeed a significant part of the NIRDP will be delivered through this Strategy. The *overall* theme of the Strategy is "*diversifying the rural economy, protecting the rural environment and sustaining rural communities.*" The individual themes are:

- Creating a Rural Champion
- Improving performance in the marketplace
- Conserving and investing in the rural environment
- Strengthening the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas

The creation of a rural champion role is recognition that rural communities are potentially affected by policies originating from government departments in a different way to urban areas. On this basis it is necessary to have an advocate to champion a coordinated and integrated approach to policy development that takes into account the potential impact of such policies on the rural community. This will not be taken

through the NIRD P but rather the Department is currently considering an appropriate mechanism to take this from concept to the operational stage.

In order to inform how this should be done the department launched a consultation during summer '08 on how the rural champion role can be developed and progressed. Key proposals include<sup>3</sup>:

- the re-invigoration of the rural proofing process;
- the establishment of a new mechanism for engaging with stakeholders;
- the development of a rural evidence base; and
- the establishment of a new cross-departmental Rural Policy Committee chaired by the DARD Minister.

### **3. RURAL PROOFING**

The 2005-2006 DARD Annual Report on Rural Proofing<sup>4</sup> defines rural proofing as a process which:

*'ensures that all relevant policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere, because of the particular characteristics of rural areas; and where necessary, what policy adjustments might be made to reflect rural needs and in particular to ensure that as far as possible, public services are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community'.*

A recent Rural proofing Review carried out on behalf of the Commission for Rural Communities<sup>i</sup> (CRC)<sup>5</sup> among other issues, identified perceived barriers to rural proofing. These included:

- Not knowing about or recognising the need for rural proofing;
- 'Spatial blindness' – this refers to policy makers understanding that the spatial effect of a policy is more apparent in some policies than in others;
- Acknowledgement by some that policy making is not a linear process so there were questions over what points the rural proofing could be applied to;
- Some central government officials believed that the role of central government was to establish the principle of rural proofing but that assessing needs and delivery methods were essentially locally led processes and not central-government led processes;
- Regional and local government however disagree with this view with some believing that the 'missing link' was central government although there was also a common view that it is not sufficiently embedded in local or regional government;

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<sup>i</sup> The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2006. Its role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage.

- Many admit to not understanding the concept of rural proofing and see it as yet another impact to be assessed in policy development;
- Unlike the mandatory impact assessments, such as those related to equality, rural proofing is not seen as a priority nor are any sanctions attached if it is not applied in the policy-making process. Some respondents indicated that there was no high-level advocate for rural proofing;
- Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is not well disseminated among policy makers by the few 'champions' that exist and where it does exist it is not often used. Most policy-making staff who seek out IAG do so on intranet resources and few would recognise other sources of information e.g. the CRC site;
- IAG that is available on government websites does not tend to specifically identify spatial or community differences that policy making staff should consider; and
- Staff are wary about contacting stakeholders because of undertones of advocacy.

To sum up, the report concluded that the main barriers preventing rural proofing are knowledge and information (availability, timing and lack of awareness) and motivation (lack of sanction and reward). Policy-makers in general had a lack of understanding of the urban-rural definition which contributed to a lack of understanding about when rural proofing needed to be applied to policy-making.

In order to address these issues consideration must be given to the dissemination of information and awareness-raising and the means to motivate policy-makers.

This report also indicates some issues that have been successful such as promoting awareness of rural proofing more directly with policy-makers as well as showing positive outcomes of rural proofing.

#### **4. CONDUCTING RURAL PROOFING**

An Inter-departmental Rural Proofing Steering Group chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and with senior officials from other departments co-ordinates the rural proofing process. This group also has the responsibility for reviewing the effectiveness of Rural Proofing<sup>6</sup>. This differs from England where, following the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (2006) Act, Defra has assumed the role of rural proofing 'champion' but the CRC acts as an independent watchdog and has a monitoring role in respect of rural proofing and it does this by producing an annual rural proofing report.

One of the main concerns about rural proofing has been that there is focus on the process as opposed to tangible outcomes of rural proofing. The first annual report published by DARD in 2004 was considered by some to highlight what departments were responsible *for* rather than demonstrable actions as a result of policies being rural-proofed<sup>7</sup>. The department engaged the Rural Development Council to develop a checklist to help policymakers with their consideration of rural proofing policies. This was published in the second annual report in 2005. As noted in a similar

checklist produced by Atterton 2008<sup>8</sup> for the Countryside Agency, two fundamental points need to be addressed:

- Who decides if a policy impact is significant and how is that decision reached?
- Are checklists to ensure that rural areas benefit from policy evaluation or merely to ensure that there is no detriment to rural dwellers *vis a vis* the impact of policy on urban dwellers?

The first point is particularly significant as it calls into question how the impact of a particular policy should be evaluated. For example, a checklist is evidently not a substitute for consultation with stakeholders but this then raises questions about how departments should engage with stakeholders on policy impact. In particular, what are the proposed structures for engagement with stakeholders and who, or what, is the designated rural champion? This also presents issues for departments such as training, advice and guidance for policy makers and the necessary evidence base on which to make decisions<sup>9</sup>.

In relation to the second bullet-point it must be clear, to stakeholders and policy makers, what the actual aim of rural proofing is. The third annual rural proofing report states that:

*“The aim of effective Rural Proofing is that all new and reviewed policy proposals, consultative papers and proposals for new legislation which are submitted to Departmental Ministers for endorsement, specifically identify any likely impact which that policy might have on rural areas or communities, and offer an assessment of how any differential impact can be addressed”.*

The phrase ‘any differential impact’ could be taken to mean a positive or negative impact but implicit in the concept of rural proofing is an approach to address any negative impact of policy that tends to be urban-centric, on rural areas i.e. there appears to be a preconception that ‘rural’ equates to disadvantage. That is not to say that policies should *benefit* rural areas over urban ones but rather that the policy should at least not have a negative effect on rural areas.

## **5. A LEGISLATIVE BASIS?**

One of the key differences between England and NI in relation to rural proofing is that the role of the CRC is embedded in legislation. The legislation<sup>10</sup> indicates that the CRC has a role in representation, advice and monitoring:

Article 19 Representation, advice and monitoring:

The Commission must take steps as appear to it to be appropriate for –

- (a) representing rural needs to relevant persons,
- (b) providing relevant persons with information and advice about issues connected with rural needs or ways of meeting them, and
- (c) monitoring, and making reports about the way in which relevant persons’ policies are developed, adopted and implemented (by rural proofing or otherwise) and the extent to which those policies are meeting rural needs.

In addition, the Chair of the CRC was appointed as the Rural Advocate in 2004. This fits with the role of the CRC which has three functions:

- **Rural Advocate** The voice for rural people, businesses and communities
- **Expert adviser** Giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others
- **Independent watchdog** Monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

This approach is different from that currently in operation in NI where all responsibility for rural proofing lies within DARD. There is an opportunity for this approach to be changed through DARD's recent consultation on the concept of Rural Champion and the enhancement of the rural proofing process.

## 6. DARD AND THE CONCEPT OF RURAL CHAMPION

DARD recently concluded a consultation on the concept of Rural Champion and the enhancement of the rural proofing process. It is evident from the consultation document that the department sees the role of Rural Champion as a *collective* one with six rural champion *roles* inside and outside of government:

- **Advocate** to represent the views of the rural community across government.
- **Watchdog / Mainstreamer** to ensure rural issues are addressed across government
- **Listener** to build information based partnerships with rural stakeholders that enable the voices of rural dwellers to be heard.
- **Advisor** to establish a rural evidence base that will aid the decision making of government policy makers.
- **Initiator** to initiate the development of policies and actions to address specific rural needs.
- **Exemplar (Setting the example)** to lead by example in improving the rural economy, environment and rural way of life.

### 6.1 ADVOCATE

DARD does not see the role of Rural Champion therefore as an individual one but one which identifies *'distinct roles that people and organisations in all levels of governance and society can play in developing rural policy'*<sup>11</sup>. This appears to be a laudable aspiration and this proposed approach has generally been welcomed in the responses received to the consultation. However, the question is where and with whom will the delineation between the roles and responsibilities lie? It may be that

the development of structures to ensure delivery of the 6 roles will become clear but there is no indication *in a practical sense* in the consultation document of what these might be. However, there is one exception to this. The DARD Minister has a clear responsibility to advocate at Executive level on behalf of her Department and, by extension, issues on behalf of the rural community. To this extent the Minister will chair a new Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy which will also be attended by senior officials from other government departments. This will act as a forum for addressing rural issues across departments. However, it remains to be seen how this will work in practice i.e. impact on policy development and decisions within departments, and feed into Executive meetings and decisions.

The consultation document also asks consultees to consider how '*we might all act as advocates for rural issue*'. There are a number of organisations in Northern Ireland that already have a role in representing or advocating on behalf of the rural community. Asking all these groups, and individuals for that matter, to act as advocates within the concept of Rural Champion suggests a preconceived notion of a homogenous rural community speaking with one voice. This is not necessarily the case; different groups may have different priorities. Therefore accountability and responsibility, for what and to whom, is paramount if the advocacy role is to become more than a theoretical ideal.

#### 6.1.1 WATCHDOG/MAINSTREAMER

The proposed new emphasis is on *mainstreaming* rural proofing rather than the heretofore approach of ensuring rural proofing was implemented. The document doesn't explain what the difference between these two approaches might be but it lays out four key actions/areas to enhance the rural proofing process. These are:

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|------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Supporting:</b>                 | Supporting all government departments with the evidence, advice and materials they need to be able to effectively rural proof all new policies. This will involve provision of comprehensive guidance, advice, promotion and training to policy makers.   |
| <b>Analysing/<br/>Implementing</b> | Involving assessment of rural proofing carried out across all departments to identify best practice, areas for improvement and future action.   |
| <b>Monitoring</b>                  | To ensure rural proofing processes are making an impact and influencing the policy making process.  |
| <b>Reporting</b>                   | Reporting on progress will also be an important element in the new process. It would be the intention to produce an annual rural proofing report and to report on progress to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, the Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy, stakeholders and the Executive. |

These areas offer the possibility that an organisation external to the Department could assume the role of 'Watchdog/Mainstreamer'. Assuming a single organisation



was appointed to this role it would be similar to the role of the CRC in England which monitors the implementation of rural proofing; with the difference that the CRC Chairperson also acts as the Rural Advocate. The recent Rural Proofing Review<sup>5</sup> produced for the CRC made a number of recommendations for CRC action in respect of its role. These were:

	<b>Proposal</b>	<b>Resource Required (H/M/L)</b>	<b>Impact (H/M/L)</b>
	<b>Advocacy:</b> promotion of awareness of rural proofing	Provide regular information, for example about the role of the CRC, rural issues, new evidence to go into departmental media and networks.	<b>Medium:</b> has to be tailored and kept up through maintaining formal and informal links <b>Medium:</b> provided it is kept up in line with departmental changes
	Conference and events which will highlight research evidence and need	<b>Low:</b> infrequent; and targeted; can cost less and be more attractive if short and focused e.g. breakfast briefings	<b>Low:</b> may attract people who will not have opportunity to use learning gained
	Inclusion in other inspection regimes, particularly the CAA	<b>Low:</b> work with Audit Commission, seek support from some local authority groups, such as the County Council's Network	<b>High:</b> local authorities and other bodies will be keen to demonstrate how they meet the standards
	<b>Advisory:</b> increase understanding and application of rural proofing	Good outcome case studies with warnings about what can be poor outcomes	<b>Medium:</b> will require collection, validation and updating <b>Medium:</b> can provide impetus as well as guidance and sources of active peer support
	Describe rural proofing in terms which policy makers are more likely to understand and fit into existing guidance	<b>Low:</b> has to be tailored to departmental priorities and policies and kept up through maintaining a wide range of formal and informal links	<b>Low:</b> low usage of guidance available likely but they are used by some
	Provide content for	<b>Low:</b> but needs to be	<b>Low:</b> not used by all

	departmental resources and training	updated with opportunities looked for and taken up	but will be sources of understanding by some
	Provide content for government wide resources	<b>Low:</b> opportunities available (ONS, BRU, Green Book)	<b>Low:</b> may be used by specialists
	Recruit practitioner peer champions in departments through case studies and awards	<b>Medium:</b> focus on good practice peers to act as sources (like beacon schemes)	<b>Low-Medium:</b> can be higher impact form more dedicated practitioners or champions
<b>Watchdog: monitoring and reporting</b>	Collect evidence from policies where outcomes can be assessed, possibly using these to develop case studies	<b>Medium:</b> can be less expensive if linked to case studies, good/bad practice	<b>Low:</b> some monitoring keeps up pressure and profile; higher impact if able to provide customised feedback and advice to departments and agreeing where to 'celebrate success'

It is interesting to note, given that the production of an annual report is a key element of the Watchdog/Mainstreamer role, that those interviewed as part of the review of rural proofing carried out on behalf of the CRC identified the production of annual reports about rural proofing as one of the actions that was perceived not to have any impact.

#### 6.1.2 LISTENER AND ADVISER

The roles of **Listener** and **Advisor** are linked in that it is envisaged that the Advisor role will support the Listener by providing evidence for decision-making and formulation of policy. The Advisor role therefore will have to be objective, and be seen to be objective, in order to provide this evidence base.

Both these functions raise questions as to the *mechanism* by which stakeholders can get their viewpoint across to the Listener, and how the Advisor can access and distill the research evidence that is available and subsequently make this available to all those involved in making decisions that impact on the rural community. Importantly, in relation to the Listener role, it is envisaged that this will not be on the basis of issue by issue; rather the consultation document suggests that it will operate on a regular basis – planning ahead, prioritising issues and working collectively to seek a consensus. This suggests that either the department or an existing organisation with the infrastructure and experience of working with rural communities or perhaps even a new organisation would assume this role.

### 6.1.3 INITIATOR

The consultation document indicates that the role of **Initiator** is to develop “*policies and actions specific to rural needs*” (paragraph 9.1) and build on that of Listener and Advisor. This may mean that should the Listener *not* achieve a consensus on a policy as envisioned then the Initiator may take the lead and attempt to “*pull together those with an interest in or responsibility for an issue that affects rural communities*” (paragraph 9.2). Again the mechanism for doing this has yet to be developed and, as per much of the consultation document, there is a vision of *all* stakeholders having an initiator role. At this stage this seems ill-defined and there is obviously a need for delineation of roles and responsibilities.

### 6.1.4 EXEMPLAR

The Exemplar role is about identifying and promoting best practice and about seeking to improve the way rural areas are dealt with. The consultation document again reiterates the collective approach, “*It is about looking forward...in how we might all lead by example*”. The document suggests that this is not a singular role but rather a mechanism or framework for the identification and dissemination of best practice. This may therefore be a *coordination* role that ensures that examples of best practice are collected, and subsequently communicated as widely and effectively as possible.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The current review by DARD of rural proofing and the role of the rural champion coincides with Defra’s relaunch, in collaboration with the CRC, of support arrangements and materials to improve rural proofing at the national, regional and local government level in England. These are still in development but this revised *approach* takes into consideration the government’s response<sup>ii</sup> to the Rural Advocate’s report on the economic potential of rural areas. Underpinning this approach is the recognition that rural areas are not all the same and there are differences within and between regions. It is for this reason that the UK Government is focusing on mainstreaming rural policy in England and delivering it within a national framework, but one which gives local areas more flexibility to respond to local circumstances<sup>12</sup>. Mainstreaming is therefore seen as a process that should occur at the national, regional and local level with delivery very much tailored to local needs. Scotland has also ‘mainstreamed’ the needs of its rural areas within all its policies, rather than a specific ‘rural proofing’ mechanism, and encourages policymakers to tailor their policies to meet local needs.

The approach taken in the Republic of Ireland has its basis in two plans: the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013<sup>iii</sup> and the CAP Rural Development Programme

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<sup>ii</sup> *Resilience and Opportunity: The Government’s Response to the report of the Rural Advocate: England’s rural areas: steps to release their economic potential*

<sup>iii</sup> Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All

2007-2013. The Rural Development Policy is guided by the White Paper on rural development published in 1999<sup>iv</sup> which aimed to<sup>13</sup>:

- identify the issues critical to the development of rural communities in Ireland;
- articulate a vision of the long-term future of Irish rural society; and
- establish an overall policy strategy with key objectives to achieve the vision goals with appropriate institutional mechanisms to ensure implementation.

The principles and general policy commitments of the White Paper are also broadly represented in the National Development Plan.

The Rural White Paper for England<sup>v</sup> had similar aspirations but a review in 2003 highlighted a number of challenges still remaining which included<sup>14</sup>:

- issues with governance and delivery mechanisms to achieve policy objectives;
- lack of prioritisation between objectives;
- understanding of the linkages between national, regional and local roles as well as the link between urban and rural areas; and
- continuing to develop a solid evidence base and evaluation framework.

In fact these are largely the problems that the DARD consultation document acknowledges with rural proofing and the delivery of policy and which it seeks to address in a revised rural proofing mechanism for Northern Ireland. Both the DARD consultation and Defra's approach reflect a move towards mainstreaming; similar to approaches taken in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. In practical terms this reflects an acceptance that while there are some rural issues that must be addressed by *specific* rural policies the focus should be on better local delivery of mainstream policies based on sound evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/rural-development/nirdp2007-2013.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Press Release 13 August 2008 – Help shape the role of the rural champion – Gildernew.

<sup>4</sup> Rural Proofing of Policies across the Northern Ireland Civil Service Annual Report 2005-2006. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

<sup>5</sup> Rural Proofing Review. Commission for Rural Communities. A report submitted by GHK – 2008 (<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/Final%20040408.pdf>)

<sup>6</sup> DARD. A guide to Rural Proofing considering the needs of rural areas and communities

<sup>7</sup> DARD Rural Proofing Annual Report 2003-2004

<sup>8</sup> Jane Atterton (2008). Rural Proofing in England: A Formal Commitment in Need of Review. Centre for Rural Economy Discussion Paper Series No. 20 (University of Newcastle Upon Tyne)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006). Chapter 2 Article 19.

<sup>11</sup> A Consultation paper on the concept of Rural Champion and enhancement of the rural proofing process

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<sup>iv</sup> Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland: A White Paper on Rural Development

<sup>v</sup> Our Countryside: the Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England

<sup>12</sup> Resilience and Opportunity: The Government's Response to the report of the Rural Advocate: England's rural areas: steps to release their economic potential, p.18 paragraph 3.5

<sup>13</sup> Introduction to Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland: A White Paper on Rural Development

<sup>14</sup> Rural White Paper Review