



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Draft Rural White Paper Action Plan

13 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mrs Dolores Kelly (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Willie Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Conor Murphy
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Niall Heaney)
Mr Keith Morrison) Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson:

I welcome Keith Morrison and Niall Heaney to the table. It is good to see you again; we have met in various guises over the past number of months, and it is good to have you here.

I understand that the Committee Clerk has been in touch with you. Given the importance that the Committee attaches to this issue and the interest that members have in it, the Committee Clerk advised you that about 90 minutes has been allocated for this session, which is being covered by Hansard. I understand that he stressed to you and your colleagues in the Department how

important it is for officials to state clearly and precisely what it is that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is asking the Committee to do and by when, what the sequencing and timeline is for progressing the action plan through the political process, why you have chosen short-term, medium-term and long-term categories for the time frame for actions, and why those are not more closely aligned to the draft Programme for Government. I ask you to address in your opening remarks what reference, if any, there is to the action plan in the draft Programme for Government. I am disappointed that the papers that have been provided do not address those points, but I trust that they will be dealt with in your presentation. I am surprised that it took as long as exactly six months to analyse the 69 responses that the Department received and before officials felt able to come to the Committee with an action plan. Hopefully, that will also be explained in your presentation.

Members, I am going to do this differently than I usually do. The action plan deals with different categories. I ask that we try to keep things sequenced and together and that we focus, if we can, on those five categories. Keith and Niall, I will give you five minutes in which to make an opening presentation. If you could then present the themes in stages, dealing with urban/rural linkages, access to services, rural communities, rural economies and the countryside. I feel that that will make members more focused in their questioning. I ask members to abide by that and to keep their questions relevant to each category. Members will see in the papers provided to them the action plan, how it is laid out and how it goes through each of those categories in turn. I am certain that you will have read through those. Without further ado —

Mrs D Kelly:

On a point of information, Chair, do we have a copy of the 69 responses? If not, why not? From my time on other Committees, I know that it is normal practice for the Committee to have sight of such responses to see whether themes emerge that are common to a number of the stakeholders. Are the responses published on the Department's website?

The Chairperson:

We will put that to the officials.

To be clear, we will give the officials five minutes in which to make an opening presentation, and we will then go into a five-minute presentation of each segment. That will keep members focused on the categories.

Mr Keith Morrison (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

Thank you very much for the opportunity, which I very much welcome, to present to the Committee on the White Paper. In answer to some of your questions, I should say that we see this as an opportunity to hear the Committee's views on the draft action plan, with a view to feeding those in as we move to finalise the document in the early new year. The timeline means that we will gather information from the Committee today, and at any subsequent time that you want to take to respond to us, and we will then feed in what we hear to the drafting of the action plan, which will go to the Executive for clearance in the new year.

Mrs D Kelly:

I am really uncomfortable about proceeding in the absence of hearing what a number of our stakeholders have to say. Can you maybe address my initial points as to when the Committee will be able to see the 69 responses and why they have not been put before us in advance of this afternoon's meeting?

Mr Morrison:

We provided a summary of the responses for the Committee. The 69 responses are available; they are available on the Department's website. We can make arrangements to make them available to the Committee as soon as we leave.

Mrs D Kelly:

I am just basing this on our experience of a departmental briefing last week, when one official gave the green light to something that was less than a third achieved. That does not mean that I am casting aspersions on your presentation, however.

Mr Morrison:

I understand. We will make those available for you; my apologies.

The Chairperson:

Can you say something about the Programme for Government and the timelines?

Mr Morrison:

Where the timeline is concerned, we have had the consultation on the draft action plan. We are in

the process of having bilateral talks with other Ministers, so our Minister is meeting other Ministers with a view to trying to tighten up and refine the action plan in advance of submission to the Executive. The Minister wants to put it to the Executive as early as she can in the new year. That is what she said.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to go into your presentation? Are you happy to go into the first segment, or do you want to give a brief overview?

Mr Morrison:

I will perhaps give some very brief background for the benefit of those Committee members who may not have seen where we have come from on this.

It is important to stress that this is an Executive document. Although DARD is leading on this matter, you will see that most of the actions in the action plan come from other Departments. That is important, given its cross-cutting nature. We were trying to identify and address the issues that stakeholders were bringing to us about the challenges facing rural communities and to come up with actions that would, I suppose, help ensure the future sustainability of our rural communities. What we also wanted to do with this document was recognise the valuable contribution that rural communities make to Northern Ireland and to find a mechanism for demonstrating the Government's commitment to those communities. That is what we have been aiming to do.

The process was stakeholder led. Five stakeholder groups produced a number of recommendations that we were then able to use to influence the actions that were coming forward from other Departments. We also had an interdepartmental committee of senior policy officials, chaired by the Minister, that helped us to get actions from different Departments. Following the stakeholder work, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development had a series of bilateral meetings with individual Ministers to press for actions to appear in the plan. We must have had eight or 10 different ministerial bilateral meetings, with the dual purpose of getting actions from those Departments and securing buy-in across them.

What we now have is the draft action plan, which members have. We focused on an action plan, because that is what stakeholders were telling us they wanted. We did not produce a

ginormous strategy with lots of facts and figures; there are supplementary research documents for that. The message that we were getting loud and clear was that stakeholders wanted to see what the actions would be. So, we focused on the action plan.

You raised a point about the short, medium and long-term categories. The idea was to try to focus Departments on delivery. The draft White Paper explains what short, medium and long-term mean in the context of the time frame. Some actions are inevitably more long term than others, but some are ongoing. Matters such as housing and roads are longer-term actions, so we tried to design the short, medium and long-term categories to capture those and provide a little bit of focus.

Again, I apologise that you do not have copies of the consultation responses. The consultation ran for 12 weeks, from 13 March to the summer. We held a number of well-attended events around the country and got a lot of stakeholder views, with 69 responses.

You asked me to touch on the five themes, so I will briefly set the scene on each of those.

The Chairperson:

That would be helpful. We will go each through theme.

Mr Swann:

Can we give feedback at that stage?

The Chairperson:

Yes. We will have questions at the end of each theme.

Mr Swann:

Can we ask questions on the general theme?

The Chairperson:

Yes. You can ask questions now, before we get into the different segments.

Mr Swann:

Thank you, Chair.

One of the disappointing things about this document is that, from the outset, it has created the perception in a lot of people that this is a White Paper that will instigate legislation. I hope that I am not right when I say that DARD has been disingenuous in the title of the document — ‘Draft Rural White Paper Action Plan’. Prior to coming here, I was involved with a number of stakeholder events. As a general comment, the document is not a White Paper and there are no proposals for legislation. I think that this paper has led a lot of community and stakeholder groups to believe, under false pretences, that what comes out of this will make it into legislation. That is one point that I wanted to raise before we went into any further discussion.

The Chairperson:

To follow that up, and before you answer Mr Swann, when it goes through a political process and some aspects of it go into legislation, the Programme for Government will also have to be considered. I asked before whether your action plan supersedes or looks through the Programme for Government. Is it on your radar at present to allow you to see where those actions sit in the Programme for Government?

Mr Morrison:

I will answer those two questions.

On the first point, I do not think that the Department has been disingenuous. To be frank, the title of the document is a misnomer. However, it is a title that stakeholders have become incredibly attached to since, going back as many as 10 years, there were calls for a rural White Paper.

Mr Swann:

There was a call for a rural White Paper, but we did not get one. We got a document titled ‘Draft Rural White Paper Action Plan’.

Mr Morrison:

I will pick up on the point about legislation.

Mr Swann:

The Department answered the call for a White Paper by giving people something completely

different.

Mr Morrison:

To pick up on Mr Swann's point about legislation, with one exception, stakeholders did not come forward with any proposals, and no proposals in the plan require legislative change. That is how we have ended up in the situation in which no legislative change is required and, therefore, with a draft rural White Paper that has no legislation. The only exception to that is rural proofing. We discussed with the Committee previously that there is some view that rural proofing should have a legislative base. Not everybody shares that view, and there are issues associated with legislation for rural proofing. It is a policy tool, not necessarily a standard. How would you enforce it? What bureaucracy would be needed? Is legislation the way to do it? The Department has not gone down the legislative route for rural proofing. We have tried to provide training, support and guidance and so forth. However, we intend to review that.

So, to pick up on that point — I will come to the Programme for Government — there are no legislative proposals in this document. None came forward as part of the stakeholder work —

Mrs D Kelly:

There was no question. It is like everything in a survey. Would you like to see legislative proposals? There was no question in the consultation document. People were asked only to "comment on" the document, but were not asked whether they wanted legislation. It reminds me of some of the old sitcom stuff about surveys depending on the question. I am sorry to interrupt.

Mr Morrison:

Just to finish off on that point, that is exactly the question that we asked the stakeholder groups when they did the pre-consultation work on this. We asked them to bring forward recommendations that address rural challenges, including any that need legislative change. We did not get any, with the exception of some talk about rural proofing. The same happened with Departments, in that they felt that they could bring forward the actions within the current legislative remit.

Obviously, there are some timing issues with the Programme for Government and how it fits with the action plan. When I looked at the Programme for Government, my sense was that the draft rural White Paper is a building block rather than a commitment. Personally, I would like it

to have been a commitment, which would have helped us to get the buy-in to deliver it, but we intend to go the Executive to get sign-off, so I think that that can be covered. A lot of the other commitments read across very clearly to the actions in the action plan. The draft rural White Paper is a subset of some of the other actions in the Programme for Government. As you look across those actions, you can find a number of areas about tackling disadvantage, telecommunications and broadband, where, if you like, the draft rural White Paper is a subset that says that we need to focus on the rural element of those. We stay mindful of the Programme for Government and try to align with it where we can.

Mr McMullan:

I would like to see us move on to the segments. We are getting hung up on words and titles, which is not really what the presentation is about.

The Chairperson:

We are talking about the overall view.

Mr McMullan:

We are all grown ups and know what it is all about.

Mrs D Kelly:

I do not think that we do. That is the point.

The Chairperson:

Without further ado, Mr Morrison, do you want to tackle the first issue, which is the urban and rural linkages?

Mr Morrison:

The first thing to say is that I fully accept that, across the five areas, there is sometimes no best fit for some of these actions. In refining the document, we may move some actions around, compress some and, hopefully, add in some new ones.

The general idea behind the urban/rural linkages theme is to get away from the notion that rural is somehow separate from the rest of Northern Ireland. A lot of people who live in rural areas work in urban areas. The services, linkages and travel between the two are very important.

Understanding more about those is a critical issue. It is about moving away from, if you like, what has sometimes been defined as “poor rural”, to looking at what rural contributes to Northern Ireland. Actions in the plan relate to elements of the regional development strategy, such as the rural-specific objectives in that draft strategy and areas such as different infrastructure and the connectivity of rural and urban.

There is also an issue with regeneration in rural areas. Depending on definitions and on Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics, there can sometimes be a gap between what we would define as a rural area for our rural development programme and what the Department for Social Development (DSD) would necessarily do in neighbourhood renewal areas. It is about trying to make those linkages to make regeneration for towns and villages across Northern Ireland more of a reality. That was the thinking behind urban/rural linkages.

Do you want me to run through the five themes?

The Chairperson:

If we just take them one at a time, I think that members will remain more focused and we will not dart back from one theme to the other. Do members have any questions on urban/rural linkages? You will see that section in your copies of the action plan on pages 13, 14 and 15.

Mrs D Kelly:

I am at a bit of a loss to understand what we are going to achieve out of this in the absence of having the responses in front of us. Looking quickly at the responses, I see that the majority of comments say that this is too broad, too vague, already in existence and that there is nothing challenging in it.

That does not inspire much confidence. I would really like to see which stakeholders said what. I do not think that today is the end of the matter. I will not be agreeing to anything at the end of this in the absence of having the comprehensive responses in front of me. I do not want to waste time, because I want to go over this again.

The Chairperson:

I note your concern. We can always invite Mr Morrison back to give another presentation. While the witnesses are here, however, we will certainly ask questions.

Mr Murphy:

I assume that this was an opportunity for us to question the officials to form our views and not necessarily just to know anybody else's views. Whatever other people said, we have to have our own views. My understanding was that this was to be simply an information session.

Mrs D Kelly:

That is what I wanted to clarify.

The Chairperson:

I want to ask you about the urban/rural linkages, Mr Morrison. I see that achieving those is heavily dependent on the Department for Regional Development (DRD), especially in the short term. Given the state of the economy, and with the cuts now being implemented, what assurance can you give that DRD will be able to perform? As well as DRD, you are relying on a lot of other Departments. In that regard, your fate is not really in your hands. How do you see the linkages happening in the short term? With other Departments having their own sets of priorities, how will you be able to enforce your rural White Paper on them?

Mr Morrison:

In a nutshell, that is the challenge that we face. It is exceptionally difficult, and the whole area is exceptionally difficult. However, what we can do is do our best to make sure that we are in there. The role that DARD will play is one of trying to influence. We have got this far because we have been in there trying to influence, cajole and persuade. We also try to inform Departments that, although they may have other priorities or do not see a specific rural aspect, stakeholders have told us what they see from their experience, which is that action is needed in that area.

You ask whether it will stick. Departments have all agreed to the commitments. The commitments were initially agreed at ministerial level, and we wanted to do that to make sure that the buy-in was there. On budget cuts and affordability, the document states that this is not a magic wand that brings lots of extra money to the table. However, Departments have agreed to deliver on the commitments from within their resources.

Picking up on Mrs Kelly's point about implementation, it is absolutely fair for stakeholders to say that, in some areas, the document is too vague or not clear or measurable enough. I know that. In some areas it is, and I am very pleased with that; in other areas, we have work to do. The

key to that is in the implementation. That is when you have a Minister chairing a group that has a stakeholder challenge, which is in the document, and we should be able to drill down into what some of the high-level commitments mean and will deliver. That is the mechanism that we see ensuring that they are delivered on and monitored.

There are enormous challenges in the document for Departments facing budget cuts, and there are difficult decisions to be made. We understand that, but we have to say to Departments that they are, for example, the Department for Regional Development or the Department for Social Development for the whole of Northern Ireland. There are responsibilities to be met, and a fairly hefty proportion of the population lives in rural areas. The question is how we can best hone in on those needs.

Mr Swann:

Actions 7 and 8 refer to the community safety strategy and community safety partnerships. We spoke about those previously. How are those progressing with the Department of Justice (DOJ)?

Mr Morrison:

We have been in discussion with DOJ, because we knew that it was developing the community safety strategy. We have been part of its steering group; in fact, we added ourselves to its steering group. If not today, tomorrow the Minister is meeting the Minister of Justice, when we will continue to push on those issues.

Mr Swann:

I have just a slight concern about the time frame and the fact that we are saying that it is long — five to 10 years. That is hardly challenging, gentlemen.

Mr Niall Heaney (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development):

I think that that means that it is ongoing in the long term. That way, it will be put in place but it is ongoing and will not stop after a certain time.

Mr Swann:

Sorry, so by “long term” you mean that you do not intend to have anything done by a particular date? Is it just an ongoing process?

Mr Heaney:

No, “long term” means it will be done within a certain time frame. Some of the targets are included as being long-term targets because we did not have another area to capture them in. However, we captured issues that are ongoing as “long term” as well.

The Chairperson:

They may be implemented in the short term, but they will continue for the long term. That is basically what you are saying.

Mr Heaney:

Yes.

Mr Swann:

This has got more confusing. I thought that there were three basic grades. Basically, you mean that there is an ongoing process and that “ongoing” does not mean something that you want to do in five to 10 years but immediately.

Mr Heaney:

We could have added another [*Inaudible.*]. If needs be, we can add that to it.

Mr Morrison:

On page 12 of the document, we have tried to define that time frame. Mr Swann makes a valid point. These things are ongoing, but before we finally publish this, we can perhaps be a little clearer on whether something is a sharper target, what it means and what the timescale is for delivery. We are revisiting all the targets with other Departments to try to tighten them up from the draft, which was produced in March of this year.

Mr Swann:

If you assess yourself against your long-term target, you will meet it because it is all [*Inaudible.*].

The Chairperson:

We are very suspicious on this Committee.

Mr Morrison:

I understand, but it is not ongoing in the sense that it will be a never-ending story; rather, it is ongoing because the work is ongoing and that was our best guess. It is for other Departments to nail down the targets, and we will continue to press them to do that.

Mr Buchanan:

What work have you done with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to identify the skills need in the food and rural sectors in order to bring forward something that will meet the need of the people in the area? We know that things are changing, and the skills needs are changing in rural areas. Therefore, a lot of work needs to be done on that. What engagement have you had with the Department on that?

The Chairperson:

Tom, I am going to stop you there. That is a different segment. We are on “Urban/Rural Linkages” on pages 14 and 15. Sorry, you are right: it is at action 6.

Mr Morrison:

One of my other responsibilities is the development of the new agrifood strategy, which is in the Programme for Government. DEL is heavily involved in that, so I know that there is another piece of work ongoing at the minute on the sector skills strategy, which is taking the same approach that has been done in the IT sector to look at exactly that. Therefore, it is about working with the industry, College of Food, Agriculture and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) colleagues, DEL and Invest NI to look at exactly what you asked about: the changing needs of the industry; the skills required; primary and post-primary production; and how we do that. That captures the need to keep a constant focus on skills for that sector, be they farm-based or processor-based. That sector skills strategy work will feed into the new agrifood strategy, which, again, will produce more of a blueprint for exactly the sorts of skills that are needed to support the agrifood sector.

The Chairperson:

Tom, I apologise for that.

Mr McMullan:

I just want to ask about the urban and rural linkages very quickly. On the rural development

strategy, there are some rural areas that have not been included in the subregional centres, and that will have a detrimental effect on them. They should be brought back in again; otherwise, areas that are in the hubs will have an unfair advantage, and that will make it hard for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in those areas that are not in the hubs to look for and tender for work. That is a big problem that has to be addressed in the paper.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to comment?

Mr Morrison:

I am aware of the issue. To be frank, the hubs that are being proposed are quite large towns. A lot of our concern has been about making sure that the rest of Northern Ireland — that is, outside those large towns, which is exactly your point — is not forgotten about. Therefore, we have been pushing, and, thankfully, in the latest draft we have seen that there are specific objectives for maximising the potential of villages and towns. I take the point that they may not be classed as “hubs” and that investment may therefore go to the hubs or clusters, or be allocated in whatever way DRD wants to allocate it. We have been arguing hard to ensure that we do not just have Belfast and Londonderry among half a dozen hubs and the rest of the campuses left white. We want to say that that white bit is the rest of rural Northern Ireland, which is our responsibility and concern. We have been arguing that, but it is the Department for Regional Development’s strategy, which will be brought forward and finalised soon.

Mrs D Kelly:

I have to express my surprise at the fact that DARD is not the lead Department in taking forward actions 3, 4, and 5 on page 14, given the potential opportunities that exist under the new rural development strategy and, in particular, the rural development programme. One action that has been called for in my constituency is a shopfront scheme similar to that which is available in towns through DSD. Why does that not appear here? It is a specific action that is achievable and measurable within the one- to three-year time frame.

I well understand why other commentators have said that many of the objectives are not very timely: their timescales are either for the short, medium or long term. Does a one-year time frame kick in from date of agreement at the Executive or from the final publication of the strategy? Should it not already be in existence in the Programme for Government? Of 76

commitments in the Programme for Government, there is no mention of the draft rural White Paper action plan. There might be a brief overview or a mention of it as an overall strategy, but it is not in a particular commitment.

Some of the most recent census information will become available next year. Is that why you refer to NISRA at action 5? How will you recognise the challenges that we talked about earlier, which were the changing demography in rural communities and meeting the needs of older people? The previous Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development made specific recommendations on that in its legacy report.

The Chairperson:

The Deputy Chairperson makes a valid point. I cannot remember the exact definition or figure, but it is a DSD commitment if a population centre has a certain number —

Mrs D Kelly:

Over 2,000.

The Chairperson:

Was it 2,000? It becomes the responsibility of DSD if the population is above that figure. If it falls below that, it is DARD's responsibility.

Mrs D Kelly:

Sorry, £2,000 is the money for transport systems.

The Chairperson:

The population figure is 4,500. If it is below that, it is the responsibility of DARD. Is that correct?

Mr Morrison:

You have both hit the nail on the head perfectly, which is why we were keen to see actions in here that can help to clear that up. The problem with DSD, DARD and who has the lead for regeneration is that DARD has no statutory power to run those sorts of shopfront environmental improvement-type schemes. DSD has that legislative power. However, we can fund some of those things through our rural development programme, perhaps by working with local

government or finding other ways in which to do it. We want to get better at doing that.

Mrs D Kelly:

Or we could introduce legislation.

Mr Morrison:

Regeneration — not specifically urban or rural but just regeneration — was one of the powers that is transferring to local government under the review of public administration (RPA). That makes it a lot easier to plug the gap, and it is a gap. The gap is between what our rural development programme can support for populations under 4,500 and what the Department for Social Development can afford to support in some of the neighbourhood renewal schemes. The actions are designed and led by DSD to try to fill that gap and find a more co-ordinated way to make linkages between urban and rural areas.

The Chairperson:

Yes, but so many population centres fall through the net because DSD just cannot help. Should that not be up to DSD and DARD together?

Mr Morrison:

On reflection, I think that we can do that.

Mrs D Kelly:

The Department and the Minister style themselves as the rural champion. I do not think that relying on the transfer of functions to plug the gap is sufficient to meet the need in what are very tight financial times for rural businesses as much as anyone else. First, if required, we should look at legislative change to plug the gap. Secondly, there are opportunities for village enhancement under the design of the rural development programme. Thirdly, is there a budget to follow the transfer of functions, or will that be additional to the work of local councils and, therefore, fall on local ratepayers?

Mr Morrison:

On your first point about legislative change, it will take some time, but you make a fair point. On your second point about DARD and DSD doing this together, on reflection, that is absolutely fair. We are not necessarily waiting on the transfer of functions to do this. There are opportunities

under the current rural development programme, but it requires people to work collectively, because DARD does not have the legislative power to do it. There is funding available under the programme, and this suite of actions will try to make it easier for those who are delivering the rural development programme, and its village renewal aspect will be done through local government and local action groups (LAGs) in order not to differentiate between a funding scheme for rural areas and a funding scheme for elsewhere. They are interested in regenerating a large town or a small village within their boundary. We are trying to put it back together again as best we can through this suite of actions.

Mrs D Kelly:

I understand Keith's point, and I know that you want to move on, Chairperson, but I am still dissatisfied that, in the absence of legislation, it will simply be left to DARD, because we know the hurdles that local community groups face at joint council committee (JCC) and LAG level on village enhancement and shopfront renewal in particular. I do not accept that the Department ought not to be taking the lead and I disagree that legislative change would take a long time. If that were a solid action that the Department was going to take the lead on, and we would not have to go through all the rigmarole and overcome bureaucracy — sometimes EU bureaucracy — it would become about the will. We are at the end of this term, and there has been very little by way of legislation. No doubt, there will be a rush in the new year, as the political will increases to prove that there is going to be some delivery in this term of office.

The Chairperson:

We will move on to “Access to Services”, which is covered on pages 16 to 21. Do you want to say something on that?

Mr Morrison:

Yes, briefly, because I am conscious of your time, and the document is in front of you. Access to services is an area that stakeholders are most keen on, and it is most relevant to rural communities and the challenges that they regularly face. Therefore, there are a number of areas in which common issues keep coming up, such as transport, broadband and telecommunications, and access to water. Rather than read out the actions, that is what it is designed to do. It is based heavily on the fact that there are a number of services, and, where we can, we will make those available to rural communities. We are making sure that the rural aspect of a service and a service deliverer is taken into account.

Mr McMullan:

Rural services include hospital provision. Will the Minister's announcement today on the future of the health service and his ideas on the way forward be factored in? We are talking about acute hospitals, about provision of home help and about more people staying at home. As such, we would need more services in rural areas to fuel that.

Mr Morrison:

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has been very willing to work with us, because it recognises that there are challenges and that there is an opportunity to better deliver its services.

I am not completely across the detail of today's report, so I do not want to speculate too much on it. I assume that it is a report to the Minister, and it is then up to the Minister to decide what actions he takes as a result of it. Therefore, in a way, it would be exceptionally difficult for our rural White Paper action plan to drive what the Minister wants to do with the report. However, we intend to keep revisiting the issues. Up until publication, they will be signed off by the Executive. Therefore, if there is an opportunity to take forward some of the ideas coming out of the review or to refine some of the actions, I am sure that the Minister will take the opportunity to do so.

Mrs Dobson:

Keith, as you said, many of the issues raised in the report are nothing new. They are issues that rural dwellers have faced for some considerable time — proximity to service, transportation, schooling, broadband access — and it is refreshing to see them highlighted again in this document.

Are the views of the respondents — that there is little new in this document — valid?

Mr Morrison:

What I see as new in this document is that we turn the spotlight on rural matters for the first time in the one place. Before I talk about the individual actions, I think it important to say that government recognises that, and recognises that there are rural challenges, in the form of an Executive document.

There are actions to address, say, broadband or transport. The new element of this is focusing in and asking what to do about them in a rural context. The discussion that we had earlier was about delivery of this. It depends on Departments' willingness, and our ability to influence Departments to deliver.

There are a number of new actions throughout the whole document, but, in a way, you are absolutely right. Some challenges have been around for some years, and there is a severe amount of frustration in rural communities that they have not been addressed. The new and most valuable element of this document is that it puts a spotlight on that. It provides a focus and a means for us to start to address some of those issues.

Mrs Dobson:

Respondents said that, owing to its lack of legislative proposals, it is not a White Paper. Do you think that they are correct to say that?

The Chairperson:

We have been through that.

Mrs Dobson:

We have been through all that? Apologies, I had a meeting, so I missed it.

Mr Buchanan:

I have read this section and I see that action 24 states:

“We will work with people living in rural communities and other relevant organisations in developing services to address need.”

That is obviously to be taken forward by DHSSPS. I do not see much in the document about supporting communities over rural post offices; rural schools, which will come under the hammer with the 5% budget cut, if it comes on; rural corner shops; and so forth. In small villages, those things mean so much to the community. I can think of a number of small villages throughout west Tyrone, and all those things mean so much to that community and the people.

Two or three years back, there was a lot of closing of post offices, and that caused some concern. I do not see much in here to help communities to secure and rural-proof those types of

services.

Mr Morrison:

There are other references in the document to schools and supporting rural businesses. However, the point that I made earlier was that, in reviewing and revising it, one option was to put all the Department of Education's recommendations in the one place, for example. What we have tried to do means that those actions are scattered throughout the document. We have tried to find a home for those issues. I hope that you will see that some of the other schools issues in here could equally have fitted under this area.

My Minister is very keen on supporting rural post offices. It is quite a difficult issue to support because of the reserved nature of post offices and the funding that they get. However, we are looking closely to see what support, if any, is available for rural post offices. We understand just how important they are as a meeting place for the local community. Therefore, we are working hard under our tackling poverty and isolation programme.

Mr Buchanan:

Surely rural post offices are easily enough sustained if they are given more services, such as issuing passport forms. Let them offer a variety of services that they can provide. On a number of occasions, services have been removed from them. If we want to sustain them, we need to give them more services, which on occasion have been stripped from them.

Mrs D Kelly:

Again, I am struck by the number of actions that have lead Departments elsewhere. In fact, as my colleague Robin pointed out, action 22 states: "We will work with DARD". Therefore, the action is obviously something that has been lifted from a health and social services plan at some stage.

I want to comment on access to services. A couple of years ago, Banbridge and its rural areas, in my constituency, had one of the highest incidences of suicide, among the farming community in particular. Where are you talking about having that sort of task force on prevention of suicides and rural isolation? There is an issue about demographic change. Where specifically are we dealing with children and young people? If it is under access to services, how will we deal with those who are outside of the post-primary age group? I share Tom's concerns over the

Department of Education's review that is shortly to be announced by the Minister, and where that will leave the matter, because we all know that rural schools tend to be the hub for a lot of other community activity. I am interested in seeing how that will be addressed.

I note that a number of the actions in respect of services are primarily long to medium term. I am not sure whether those were set in the context of the budgetary constraints that we are looking into, but the news is getting worse rather than better.

Mr Morrison:

They were set in that context.

Mrs D Kelly:

I was at a meeting yesterday with DRD. In that regard, I want to mention the green school travel policy. How are we going to achieve sustainable schools and safe cycle routes, for instance? Those are some general observations to begin with.

Mr Morrison:

Part of this is about us gathering additional ideas and issues that are not included in the White Paper, so your comments are valuable. In the later part of the document, you will see that DHSSPS is willing to work with rural communities on the implementation of a number of its strategies, such as those on suicide and mental health. I know that it is something that our Minister is very concerned about, and she has been approached by the Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-harm (PIPS), for example. In fact, I think that she might be meeting the group today. That is something that is very much across our radar and that we can use to influence.

You will also find issues relating to schools, their multifunctional uses and making the most of them in a later element of the document. We are trying to do it. Communities are saying to us that they have assets and are asking what they can do to make it easier for those assets to be used? They ask about blockages and barriers, be they insurance or affordability, for instance. I would like this to say that we will make every school in rural communities open and available after 6.00 pm. The Department of Education is saying that it will look at those areas to see how that can be done.

The Chairperson:

That is a very important point, and one that I would certainly reinforce. That is not happening in practice. The obstacles seem to be placed there by some of the operators of the education boards and not necessarily by the school staff.

Mrs D Kelly:

Sometimes it is the boards of governors.

The Chairperson:

Sometimes it is the boards of governors, but they are advised by the education boards to prevent that from happening. It can be about insurance points or who pays for the heating. It is as small and minor as that at times, and it is something that needs to be thrashed out.

Mrs D Kelly:

Is there a budget to set against any of the actions identified?

Mr Morrison:

There is not a specific budget. Departments that are signing up to the actions have said that they will do them from their existing resource. Therefore, we were not in a situation in which we had a lot of additional resource to pour into this. It is about making better use of existing resource or doing different things. Departments have signed up to the document, and we hope that, through the Executive, they sign up to the final document. The budget is talked about in the body of the document. There is simply not the additional resource around, but that is our way of saying that Departments have committed to this, so they have to commit to finding the resource from within their existing budget.

Mrs D Kelly:

Is there any commitment from the Department to look to other mechanisms for EU funding? I know that there are opportunities on international applications for EU funding, particularly for children and young people. I remember reading an article about the South of Ireland and the North applying for funding for children and young people, in particular.

Young people in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage, largely through lack of access to services. There should be a section looking at young people's needs.

Mr Morrison:

There is a challenge there. We had to consider whether having a theme for children and young people would mean that we should have a theme for older people. All the groups living in a rural area can exacerbate your vulnerability. We did not go down the route of taking that group approach. Some stakeholder groups analysed it and did it in that way. We are saying that there are issues, and rurality can have an impact on how you deliver. We are also saying that, within that, there are groups that are more vulnerable to living in a rural area. Part of that is our own anti-poverty and isolation work.

For example, we are trying to work with outside organisations such as the Rural Development Council for EU funding for children and young people to see how we tackle those issues, perhaps through bringing in EU funding and a little bit of national funding. DARD is certainly attuned to that. As you say, the challenge for other Departments in a period of austerity is to try to maximise their funding. However, we did not go down the group route. We chose to address the issues and themes rather than individual groups, but we are very mindful of that in the document.

Mr Swann:

I want to return to school facilities. We are talking about such facilities not being available because of boards of governors, and all the rest. We will be shortly getting to the stage when those facilities will not be available to anybody, especially if rural schools close. Are there any ongoing discussions on that? I see that action 32 in the White Paper refers to you working with the Department of Education. Are there any discussions about how, after school closures, which will probably happen anyway, facilities such as pitches and changing rooms can be transferred to other ownership or to other promoters, for want of a better expression, such as local councils and community groups to ensure that those facilities, which have had a lot of investment, remain in the rural community and are actually more accessible to rural dwellers? That would tie in with action 25, which refers to 'Sport Matters' and the delivery of sport.

The White Paper is already six months behind. An awful lot has happened in the meantime, with more statements and press releases. I am really looking at the next edition of the document, Keith. Where are you with that, or how flexible is it?

Mr Morrison:

It is flexible and ongoing. Even though we agreed it as an action plan, we still have to monitor it

and take account of changes. To be honest, that was not the discussion that we had with the Department of Education. A lot of that discussion was about stakeholder views and how we improve the sustainability of schools. We did not discuss what happens when a school closes. Although you make a very valid point, that is the reality.

Mr Swann:

The reality is that everybody around this table knows what is going to happen, and I am disappointed that you have not had a discussion about school closures. Perhaps I picked you up wrongly. That discussion should have been prevalent.

Mr Morrison:

As I said, the focus to date has been on how we maximise the sustainability. We know the challenges that face rural schools, and that is why we are here, so we will take a note of that.

Mr McMullan:

The words “community transport” do not appear in the document. Rural transport is but community transport is not. They are two different things. One is just as important as the other, but community transport, and the problems that we are having with it, needs to be in the document.

Disability also needs to be in there as a category of its own, along with the young and the elderly, and so on. The problems faced with disability and special needs in isolated rural areas also needs to be included, as do problems with getting to work and to services such as education and day-to-day facilities. We can no longer bus people out to facilities, because in some places those facilities are closing or moving further away. We have that problem. Disability and special needs should be a programme or a category of its own for consideration the same as every other part of the community.

The Chairperson:

OK. We will now move to the next segment of the document, which is titled “Rural Communities”. I am aware of the time, so I ask members to keep their questions succinct and witnesses to do the same with their answers.

Mr Morrison:

Again, Chairperson, in the interests of saving time, I will give a brief explanation. Members will have read this section of the draft White Paper and can see its actions. This area covers issues such as rural proofing, housing, tackling poverty, community development, community engagement in areas such as planning, community involvement and community health issues. Members will also see some of the education and local rural development learning from the current programme coming through. In a nutshell, this section is about maximising the assets in rural communities.

Mrs Dobson:

Following on from Robin's point, it is ironic that we are viewing a document that is a vision for a fair and inclusive rural society when a considerable number of our rural schools are under threat. I refer you to action 34. Will the coming schools audit be looked at to ensure that it does not have a negative impact on our rural areas?

Mr Morrison:

It is difficult for me to argue on behalf of the Department of Education. The broad principle that we are starting with is that we need to have rural community engagement and a rural community voice in that audit. My understanding of the audit is that it is, thankfully, broader than just numbers. It will look at leadership and quality of education, and, to be fair to the stakeholders, that is also what they are saying. They will promote the benefits of being in a small rural school, but they also recognise that there are issues and challenges.

As to rural-proofing the audit, this is our opportunity to influence the other Departments. The draft White Paper gives us the opportunity to ask whether those Departments have considered the impact on rural communities when they are taking decisions on new policies.

Mrs Dobson:

If you knew that the audit was coming from the Department of Education, why you did not consider its impact on rural schools? Robin made that point. Why did that not feature in your considerations?

Mr Morrison:

I return to where I began. Some actions are the responsibility of other Departments. Our role is

to make them aware of the rural challenges and the issues that rural communities face. We have done that, we have pushed it and we have tried to influence. If DARD or this Committee could write the actions that come forward, I suspect that they would be different to the actions that the Department in question is writing. That is the tension, and that will be the tension in delivering that piece of work.

We must find the mechanisms to continue to push and to try to influence. However, we must also try to understand where the Department of Education is coming from. Officials in that Department are the specialists and experts in education. We can bring to them the community voice and the rural aspects as we see them. However, the interesting part of this process is that we have told those Departments what our views are and that it is their responsibility to decide what they want to do. We cannot take that responsibility from them. We can make them aware of the issues and tell them what we are hearing, as you said. However, the ultimate responsibility for the actions and the delivery on those actions must lie with the other Departments.

Mrs Dobson:

With so many rural schools under threat and the audit coming, do you agree, as Robin said, that the draft White Paper needs to be updated? Come January, it will be out of date.

Mr Morrison:

The document is subject to Executive sign-off. We will ask the Department of Education how the recent announcements on the audit fit with the current actions. We will also ask whether the actions need to be updated or whether new actions need to be created.

The Chairperson:

I ask members to try to keep their comments as succinct as possible and to try to stick to one question. You can be clever with that question if you like, but ask just one question, please.

Mr Swann:

Chairperson, some of the issues that have been raised in the paper are so serious that I may need to ask more than one question.

Actions 40 and 41 refer to fuel poverty and alternative cost-effective fuel in rural areas. Given that fuel poverty is a big agenda item at this time, will you give me some guidance as to where

DARD sees that issue going on an individual basis? Ballymena, for example, has a great thermal substructure in the ground, but it cannot be accessed or used because of Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) regulations and because the natural gas pipeline needs to be protected. The residents of and people around Ballymena cannot use the geothermal heat there to heat their homes because one Department is working against another. Is there something in the White Paper that can help there or change or challenge that?

Mr Morrison:

I was at an Assembly event on fuel poverty with the Chairperson not that long ago. Fuel poverty is a massive area. I thought that we were fortunate in that we had a rural table at that event that was able to make in open forum the points that we have made in the document; for example, that rural fuel poverty tends to affect older, harder-to-heat homes, and we do not have a gas alternative. Schemes such as the warm homes scheme need to take account of those issues.

We have had some success. We are always working with the Housing Executive, Power NI or the Department for Social Development to say to them that, under our tackling poverty and isolation commitments, we can bring some money to the table and perhaps help to fill some of the gaps in their broader programmes. We are saying in the White Paper that there is a rural dimension for those who have overarching responsibility for addressing fuel poverty and have some of the bigger levers, for example, through social tariffs. Therefore, we continue to push, and sometimes we will bring some money to the door to tackle rural-specific issues or homes. However, the points on fuel poverty in the document are designed to show that DSD recognises that there are rural issues involved.

Mr Swann:

DETI will not allow the exploration of geothermal energy as an alternative fuel because it has agreements with natural gas suppliers. Can anything in the White Paper challenge those two Departments to sort that issue out?

The Chairperson:

On a point of information, the issue of renewable heating incentives is still out for consultation, so it is not finalised.

Mr Swann:

I am not referring to renewable heating incentives. I am talking about geothermal energy around Ballymena, which is not allowed to be explored or used because Phoenix or Firmus Energy, whichever has the supply, has an agreement around economic challenges to its supply. The exploration of geothermal energy in the Ballymena area would be an economic challenge, so it is not a question of the renewable heating incentive. Can the rural White Paper be used as a lever to get those two Departments to come to a solution together, especially as action 41 is about accessing alternative cost-effective fuel in rural areas?

Mr Morrison:

I am not familiar with the specifics of that, Mr Swann. A number of actions in the draft White Paper are designed to get Departments to work better together. That is what we have to do if we are to exploit the opportunities for the benefit of rural communities.

Mr McMullan:

I would like to see the Department do more to put gas into areas that are not served with a gas programme. Those include large areas of north Antrim, which are totally without gas. We have to rely on oil or electricity — we do not have that third choice. I do not know whether the White Paper can lever that out, because we have lobbied hard enough to get gas through councils but were unsuccessful. I did not know that the ground made Ballymena so warm at heart.

Mr Swann:

Of course we are.

Mr McMullan:

It is a wonder that somebody has not tapped into that.

Mr Swann:

We are full of hot air up my direction.

The Chairperson:

That is a valid point, however, and it may be something that you could press for. Even though the 10 towns have gas, many areas in those towns do not. That is mainly because the pipeline is directed only at businesses, and only the population masses along that pipeline can avail

themselves of that gas. Pressure could be applied there, because so many departmental buildings and offices have not availed themselves of gas. If they did, that could open that network to the multiple housing developments along its route. Perhaps the White Paper could target that specific issue through encouragement. If it cannot influence the market and service providers, it can influence the Departments to avail themselves of gas. That is important, because it would open up the network.

Mr McMullan:

That is a very good point, Chairman. It would also help to encourage the possible development of businesses in rural areas that could have gas. You are currently at a disadvantage if you are competing to get business into your area without that alternative fuel source.

The Chairperson:

You are right. There is an ongoing debate, which the paper could influence, on whether we can expand the gas network in the west or whether we should make sure that, where there is a gas network, we expand into smaller towns and villages.

Mr Swann:

Are you going to start fracking everywhere?

The Chairperson:

No, no. Look at the small population centres in the east that still do not have gas and at the towns in the west. There is a debate about where we go next. That is something that the rural White Paper could influence.

Mrs D Kelly:

I want to ask specifically about actions 48, 55 and 61. Given the fatalities that have occurred on farms, it is not good enough that responsibility be left with DHSSPS. I told officials not so long ago that there should be a better education programme and much more departmental proactivity on farm accidents in particular. It is remiss that there is not a specific action for the Department in that regard.

Action 55 deals with a higher education strategy. There is an existing higher education strategy. The past 10 years has created a lost generation of young people. It is far too long a time

frame and does not take into account the work that DEL has done already.

Turning to action 61, I would like some clarification on the respective rural White Papers, given our earlier introductory discussion. Even the Department itself is falling into the trap of referring to this document as a rural White Paper rather than an action plan.

I have to register my concern and disappointment that, given the concerns expressed by the Rural Community Network in its presentation to the Committee in its early meetings, and the divisions that clearly exist in our rural village populations, in the section headed “Rural Communities” there is an absence of any action on good relations and tackling sectarianism. In that section, there is no specific mention of rural childcare and anti-poverty initiatives, other than a broad reference to fuel poverty. Those absences are regrettable and have to be looked at again.

The Chairperson:

Do any other members wish to comment? If not, we will move on.

Mr Morrison:

I would like to respond to a couple of those points with some good news. Mrs Kelly asked about good relations and anti-poverty initiatives. We got that feedback as part of the consultation. We are working with the likes of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to determine what additional actions can be put into the action plan.

Mrs D Kelly:

And that is good news?

Mr Morrison:

Well, that is what we are trying to do. As far as health and safety on farms is concerned, the number of fatalities has created a very difficult situation. DARD can work with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or DHSSPS on the issue, but the challenge is about DARD not becoming responsible for everything. I take the point that there are things that we can work on together, but when it comes to taking —

Mrs D Kelly:

But it is also about being responsible for nothing, if you know what I mean.

Mr Morrison:

There is a balance to be struck when it comes to taking responsibility for health and safety on farms off others. We want the same thing, which is fewer accidents.

The Chairperson:

OK. We will move on to “Rural Economies”, which begins on page 29 of the document.

Mr Morrison:

I am very happy to take questions. The actions are there. It is a key area in supporting rural businesses.

The Chairperson:

I will recap, to give members time to consider the issue. The agrifood economy and associated strategy is the one that springs to mind straight away. The implementation of the Food Strategy Board is prominent, yet there is no mention of it in the rural White Paper. Should it be included? Should there be more emphasis on the agrifood sector? What are your thoughts?

Mr Morrison:

It is one of those situations in which things have developed. It is about providing support to the agrifood sector. When this was drafted and consulted on in March, it was ahead of time. Thankfully, the draft Programme for Government includes the additional target of supporting and developing a broader strategic vision. My food division is also responsible for that. We can reflect it, although I am always very conscious that the document could become a DARD business plan. You could put all the DARD actions in there. That is a priority, and we recognise the importance of the sector. There is a linkage with the Programme for Government and following that through. I am delighted that it is in the draft Programme for Government. We will work hard to support the sector over the next number of years. The new structures that we are putting in place will do that. It can, of course, be reflected in here.

The Chairperson:

The Food Strategy Board is a joint —

Mr Morrison:

It is between DETI and us.

The Chairperson:

There is joint responsibility.

Mr Morrison:

That is right.

The Chairperson:

That could well be implanted in the White Paper.

Mrs D Kelly:

The common fisheries policy challenges alongside CAP are startling by their absence. They are absent completely from the rural economies section. If you were in Margaret Ritchie's constituency of South Down, you would be most perturbed that the Department has not recognised that. Perhaps it has given up the ghost already, given the bad news that has been coming from Brussels.

What can you say about CAP? We have already done a significant amount of work on it, but there is the question of whether that is sufficient enough for an action.

I have a concern about action 65, which is about Invest NI and the Tourist Board. Parts of my constituency — Craigavon, for example — would not be recognised as tourist destinations. There may well be other parts of the North that are not recognised. They are at a disadvantage if Invest NI is going to adhere to that criterion as opposed to the backpacker-type of tourism in areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs), such as the wetlands, and so on. Perhaps you can investigate whether that will place some areas at a disadvantage.

Obviously, I support the Chairperson's comments about the agrifood sector and food processing. You also have to talk about the importance of infrastructure and the A5. The entire

west of the Bann, by and large, is a designated rural community.

The Chairperson:

Keith, do you want to come back on those points?

Mr Morrison:

We can make a point about Invest NI, because it is about scope. Sometimes, rural areas suffer a little bit because of signature projects. We always make the point that people come and stay in rural areas to travel to some of the signature projects. We can check the scope of that.

We captured roads and infrastructure very early in the document. I fully accept its importance, but it is not really within my gift to start specifying specific road schemes. We can put the point to DRD about the importance of infrastructure and the fact that the Committee has made this comment to us, but I cannot make a commitment to —

Mrs D Kelly:

The Executive made significant commitments on a North/South basis at St Andrews about the A5 and, I think, the A8. They made an agreement in principle. Surely that should be referenced if you are looking at infrastructure and economies, and the investment that those two routes could realise.

Mr Morrison:

I will take that point back to the Department.

The Chairperson:

To be fair, you could name every road scheme.

Mrs D Kelly:

No, but those are two specific ones.

The Chairperson:

I could argue that the A26 is more important. You could get into that game.

Mrs D Kelly:

Chairperson, the Executive have already agreed those two. That is my point.

Mr Morrison:

We will certainly make the point about the Committee's request to reference —

Mrs D Kelly:

It is about joined-up government.

Mr Swann:

Keith, be careful to note that that is not the Committee's request but the Deputy Chairperson's, unless you want include the A26, Cullybackey and a number of other schemes.

On actions 69 and 78, which encourage procurement by other Departments to support our agrifood industry, the present procurement process is not easy, especially for new suppliers trying to get on to the list, given the size of the application forms. If you are currently a supplier, you get more points. Are you going to do anything to facilitate the process and make it easier for a new supplier trying to get in through the doors of government, as is suggested in actions 69 and 78? The Welsh Assembly Government have an Open Doors programme, and they facilitate processors, producers and suppliers to help them to get into supplying government contracts. When we are talking about our own production, the Minister made a commitment to try to get local eggs into our hospitals, schools and elsewhere to support our own industry. Is there anything in this paper, apart from actions 69 and 78, that will do that?

Mr Morrison:

Those two points are designed to get the foot in the door to do exactly that. With regard to the detail and working through the barriers, it was flagged up for us exactly as you say, Mr Swann. There are barriers to getting access to government for procurement. If we start with those, that ties in with my earlier point about working through the detail to see how we will deliver. There could then be some discussion about what is preventing it and what action we should take to move it forward. Those actions are designed to try to take that issue forward.

Mr Swann:

Action 69 states:

“We will continue to work with DARD and DFP to explore where Government, as our largest procurer”.
However, that is a short-term aim. Has that started, or is it still something —

Mr Morrison:

It is not happening across the piece at this stage, although I am aware of the Minister’s commitment to write to others.

Mr Swann:

You have not started the conversation?

Mr Morrison:

No. It came out as an issue from stakeholders. We pressed the Departments, and they agreed to include those actions. We will continue with our discussions on how we start to move it forward, but we also need to finalise the actions, which is part of the challenge.

Mr McMullan:

Invest NI deals with the large corporations, and it has a clear agenda for doing that. However, we do not have anything with the same powers to promote small and medium-sized enterprises, and we need something to do that.

Mr Morrison:

We agree. Invest NI has clients, and it is focused on export. How do we provide that support and advice to SMEs that may be just getting into the market and are not exporting? A number of actions in the draft White Paper are designed to try to provide that better business support and advice to SMEs.

Mr McMullan:

That would build into what Mr Swann was saying about firms being able to supply, and so on. One of the key things, and something that I believe should be included, is councils. Under the RPA, a particular block of councils will have a central procurement policy, and, therefore, it will be important for local small and medium-sized enterprises to be able to feed into that block with their business. It is important for that to be got out now. Therefore, we must get councils on board to ensure that they have a policy that would allow for and show favouritism, although that may not be the right word, to local businesses. Nevertheless, there must be some way in which to

allow those businesses to feed into the central procurement programme for RPA. It is vital. We cannot look at just the wider programme. We have a big one on our door step with RPA. Childcare is mentioned in there, as are post offices, which Mr Buchanan brought up earlier.

Mr McCarthy:

I do not see anything in there on what you are doing to encourage rural businesses to do on planning. I come across difficulties when people want to start up a business in the rural community and are faced with planning restrictions. A development could lead to jobs, but then a big CEO comes down and says that it cannot be done. Can you do anything to encourage that or to twist the arm of senior planning officers?

Mr McMullan:

Action 43 might refer to that.

Mr McCarthy:

That is fine.

The Chairperson:

Action 43 is way back. It states:

“We will review the implementation of PPS21.”

Mr Morrison:

Actions 44 and 45 refer to better joining-up of rural development and planning. We hear that same comment all the time.

Mr McCarthy:

Sorry for going so far back.

The Chairperson:

You are OK. We will move the next section, which concerns the countryside.

Mr Morrison:

It is fair to say that, in the stakeholder comments in the summary that you received, there was some criticism about not taking on board some stakeholder reports. The environmental side in

particular felt that the action plan as drafted did not do enough on a number of issues such as climate change and biodiversity. We are trying to improve that, and we will have a meeting with the Minister of the Environment to try to get additional actions to address those issues. However, in a way, this area was intended to capture that, and we realise that it needs strengthened further. We are trying to do that so that the final draft will be broader and capture the conservation of rural areas as well as the opportunity that they provide for renewable energy or recreation.

Mr Swann:

Action 86 states:

“We will take a range of actions to reduce the bureaucratic burden on those working within the confines of EU Directives and promote the principles of Better Regulation when transposing any EU directives.”

The Department of the Environment (DOE) is the lead Department on that. We had a presentation last week about the reduction of bureaucracy and red tape by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which has set itself a target of, if I recall correctly, a 15% reduction.

The Committee Clerk:

Interim 2011.

Mr Swann:

It achieved 3·6%.

The Committee Clerk:

Perhaps 4·37%, but certainly less than 5%.

Mr Swann:

However, I can assure you that it was nowhere near 15%. Do you not think that there is a problem with giving that responsibility to another Department? Would you not be better off taking the lead on that? European directives and bureaucracy are —

Mrs D Kelly:

Chairperson, can I come in on that point? The Minister of the Environment has given a commitment on that, but it is not reflected in here.

Mr Morrison:

It is not a matter of giving that responsibility over. There are enough rules and regulations on DOE side to warrant that entry, and, to be fair to it, it recognised that and put forward that action. However, I take the point completely about recognising the DARD issues associated with that and how we might redraft them.

The Chairperson:

Surely the rural White Paper is there to champion rural issues. The different EU directives that are coming down that refer predominantly to rural issues will be on single farm payments and all the things that DARD is responsible for now. Therefore, although I take your point that DOE has to take on board a lot of EU directives, that should be for DOE/DARD to do. As Mr Swann said, when we see how DARD has failed in that regard, how does it have any real credibility to impose, ask or pressurise the other Departments to come up with the goods?

You can understand how things could be let go and other Departments could be relaxed because of the fact that DARD does not meet its targets.

Mr Morrison:

I take the point that there are challenges for both Departments, and the redraft will reflect that.

Mr McMullan:

On actions 85, 86, 87 and 88, there is already a programme through the DOE for meeting waste management targets. That is a European directive that is imposed on us. We are working through the likes of Arc21 and the North West Region Waste Management Group (NWRWMG), the latter of which, I think, has almost fulfilled its targets. That will lead on to renewable energies, and so on. It also leads on to things such as electricity going back to the grid. I think that we have the right people at the head. For example, actions 87 and 88 mention the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but, in reality, one of the main things here for renewable energy is the use of wind farms, which is getting hammered in a lot of the rural areas. Wind farms could be used for renewable energy for farm, and so on, but planning permission for them is being turned down, especially in the north Antrim area. I cannot speak for other areas, but we have a problem there. DETI is the other Department that deals with the issue. I think that we have the right idea when we see DOE on the renewable energy side of things here, because there is a large European programme already going and ready for completion. I think that the

north-west group will be ready for completion next year or the year after. It is down to the last bidder. I think that the right people are in place. You could look at the fringes and say that so-and-so should be involved, but the main Department paying the bills is DOE.

The Chairperson:

OK. Are there any further comments or questions? Thank you very much, Keith and Niall, for going through that action plan. I hope that you will take a lot away with you.

Mr Morrison:

Absolutely.

The Chairperson:

There are some aspects of the rural White Paper that cause a lot of frustration for individual members and the Committee as a whole. I suggest that the officials consider the Official Report of this evidence session in order to pick up some of the many points that have been raised. We will expect to see a lot of them implanted in the document. We would also like to have sight of the 69 responses to the consultation. We will see what comes out of those when we review them.

Mr Morrison:

Absolutely, and apologies again. We will make those available to you as soon as we can, and I will make myself available to talk to you about those any time that you want. That was a really helpful session, thank you. We have been given plenty of food for thought. It is a challenging area, but we are getting there.

The Chairperson:

I understand that. OK, thank you very much.