



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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Paper 73/14

12<sup>th</sup> June 2014

NIAR 181-14

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# Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing – scoping paper

## 1 Background and context

This scoping paper explores the topical issues of rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing, which have been identified as topics of interest by the Members of the ARD Committee.

The paper does not propose nor adhere to particular definitions of the terms, but rather seeks to explore the issues whilst identifying factors that may be contributing to a sense of rural isolation within Northern Ireland and the impacts of this on rural communities/farmers in particular.

The paper is not designed to offer a comprehensive assessment of the issues but is rather designed to scope some of the potential issues contributing to isolation/rural isolation and rural community/farmer welfare issues for the ARD Committee, with a view towards possibly producing more detailed papers in the Autumn.

Given this context, and the breadth of the topics involved this paper will look at the issues under the following headings:

- Geographical factors;
- Wider societal factors; and
- Poverty and income factors.

## 2 Rural Isolation – contributing factors

This paper has deliberately avoided defining what is meant by isolation or rural isolation and rather identifies a number of factors that may be contributing to a sense of isolation/rural isolation within Northern Ireland. The lack of a fixed definition as to what actually constitutes isolation/rural isolation has meant that the paper could have touched upon many areas but the researcher has decided to focus on a number of potentially key factors.

### 2.1 Geographical factors

#### 2.1.1 Proximity to services - Deprivation

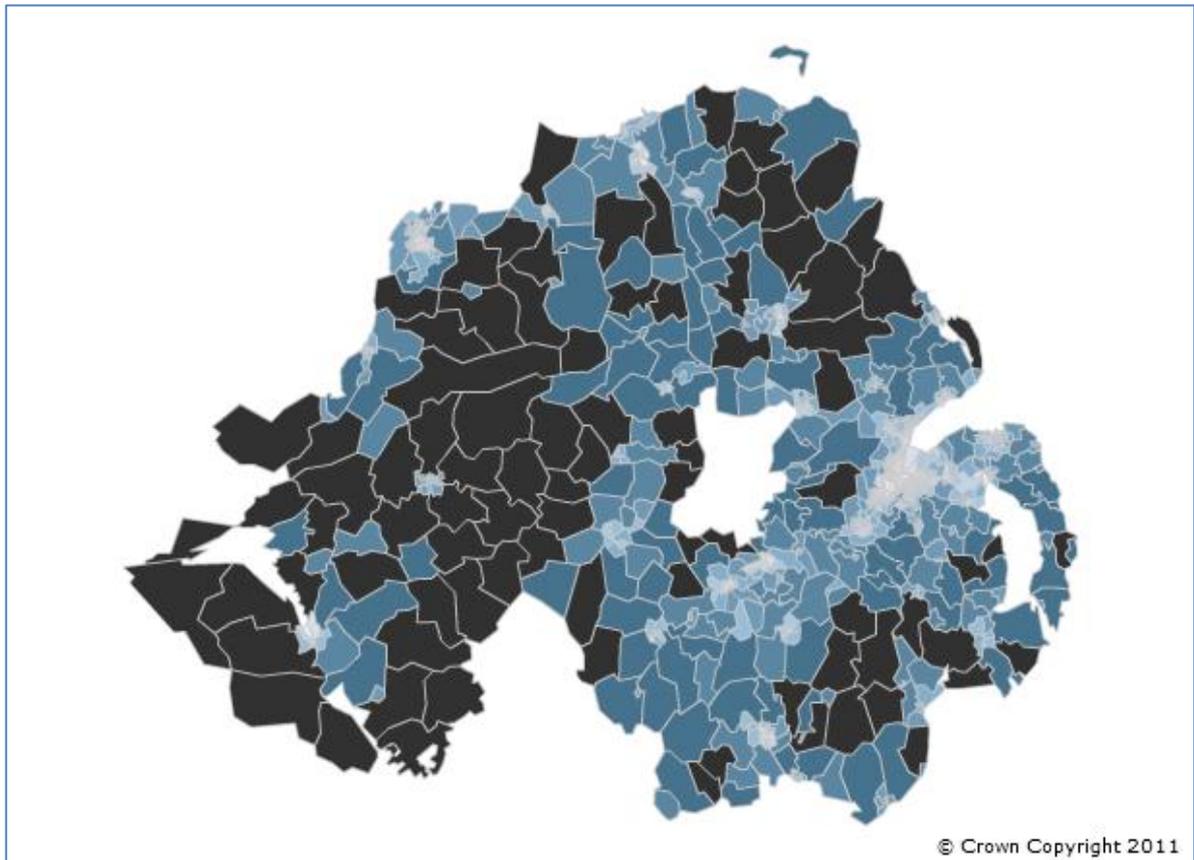
Geographical isolation is often assessed through the proximity to services. The Proximity to Services domain within the Noble indices of Deprivation has effectively assessed the degree of proximity to the following key services for the entire population of Northern Ireland:

- GP premises;
- A&E Hospital;
- Dentists;
- Opticians;
- Pharmacists;
- Job Centre or Jobs and Benefits Office;
- Post Office;
- Supermarket/Food Store;
- Large Service Centre;
- Council Leisure Centre;
- Financial Services; and
- Other general services.

Figure 1 below illustrates the distribution of deprivation in relation to the proximity to services domain data for all of Northern Ireland's 890 super output areas. Areas with darker colours are more deprived and the greatest levels of access to services deprivation are found within rural areas. The black areas within figure 1 represent the 10% most deprived SOAs in relation to proximity to services.

On the basis of the data within figure 1, many rural people are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience issues in relation to their proximity to, and by default, access to key rural services.

Figure 1: Proximity to Services Domain – data – top 10% most deprived SOAs in black<sup>1</sup>

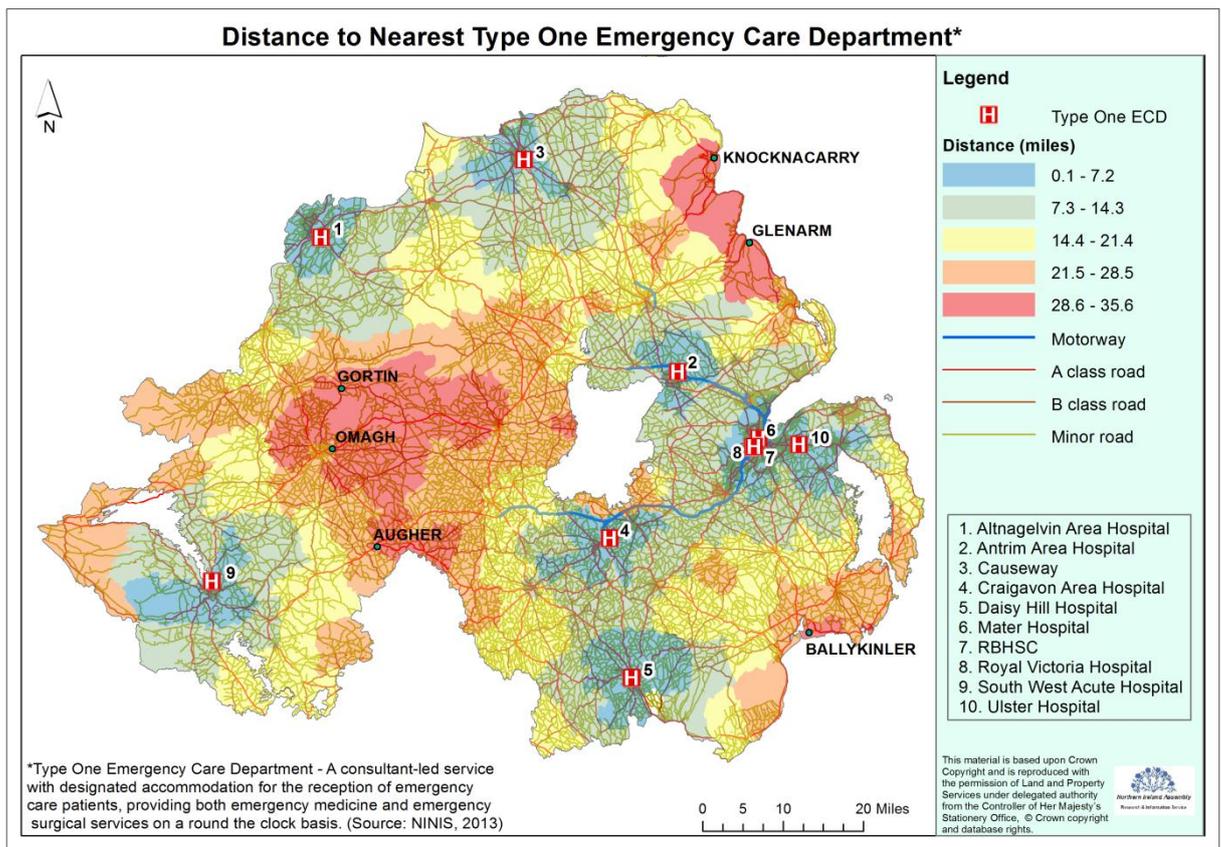


### 2.1.2 Accessing Health facilities – type 1 emergency provision

Issues regarding the proximity to services may also continue to have a greater effect on the rural population if the trend for centralisation that has shaped delivery models for services such as health continues. The impact of some of the changes in health provision is highlighted in figure 2 which illustrates the required travel distance to a type 1 emergency care department, and reveals the potential challenges faced by people living in areas such as West Tyrone and the Antrim Glens.

<sup>1</sup> Proximity to service domain , top 10% most deprived SOAs filter, Deprivation Data, NINIS mapping system, NISRA website

Figure 2: Distance to Nearest Type One Emergency Care Department<sup>2</sup>



### 2.1.3 Access to a car/van

Whilst the ability to break the 2011 census data down into rural and urban categories is not currently available the information that has been released to date highlights an issue which may well contribute to geographical isolation for rural areas. The number of total households within Northern Ireland that do not have a car or van available within the household has been calculated as 23%, whilst this figure climbs to 45% of 1 person households and 53% of 1 person households aged 65 and over. Whilst a lack of access to a car or van may not be a major issue within an urban setting where many services could be accessed by walking, cycling, public transport or taxi, within a rural location this could present greater problems as the distances needed to travel may be greater but the options for getting there fewer.

### 2.1.3 Access to 3G/mobile signal/broadband

The most recent OFCOMM Communications Market report<sup>3</sup> published in August 2013 highlighted the fact that 3G coverage within Northern Ireland is the lowest across the

<sup>2</sup> RalSe GIS service map as prepared for the Assembly Health Committee using NINIS data

<sup>3</sup> [Communications Market Report: Northern Ireland, OFCOM, 1st August 2013](#)

UK, whilst three-quarters of mobile customers experienced problems, driven by being unable to get a mobile signal at all (59%).

The report also revealed that rural broadband uptake in Northern Ireland had improved over recent years but it should be noted that rural NI broadband uptake at 75%, whilst higher than urban NI uptake at 73%, was still lower than the overall rural UK figure of 82%.

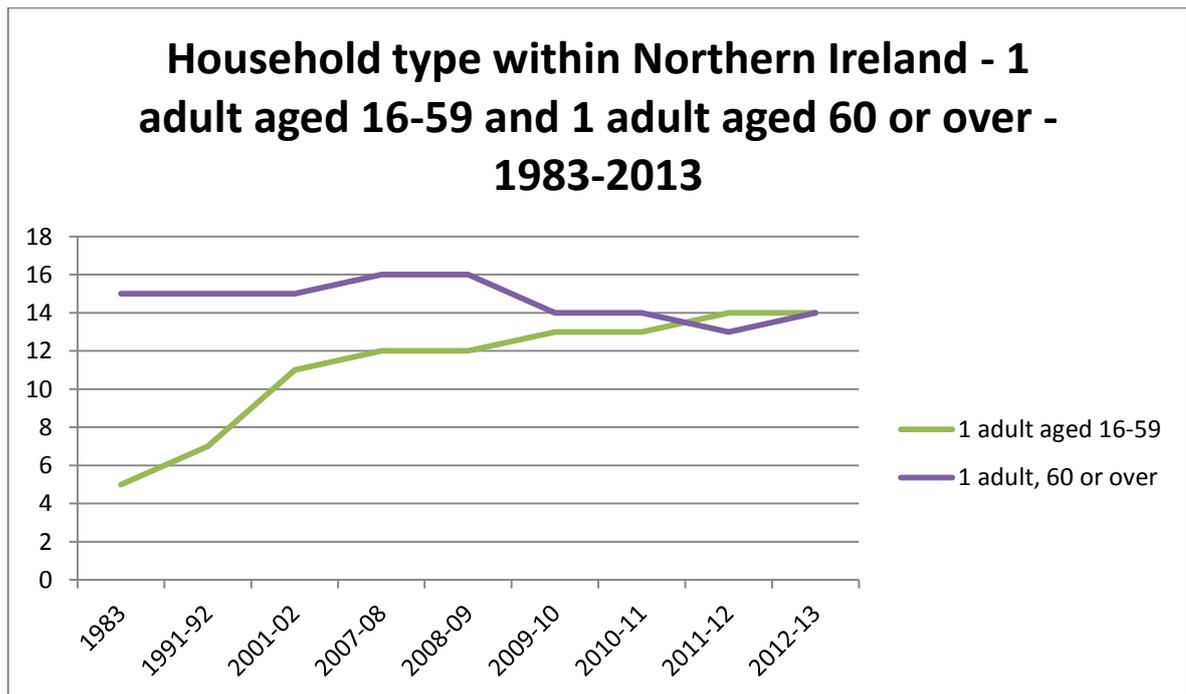
The implications of difficulties in having reliable telecoms and internet access are hard to accurately assess but may well increase a sense of isolation for some rural dwellers.

## 2.2 Wider societal factors

Societal factors that may be contributing to a sense of rural isolation are harder to determine but may include the following.

### 2.2.1 The rise in living alone

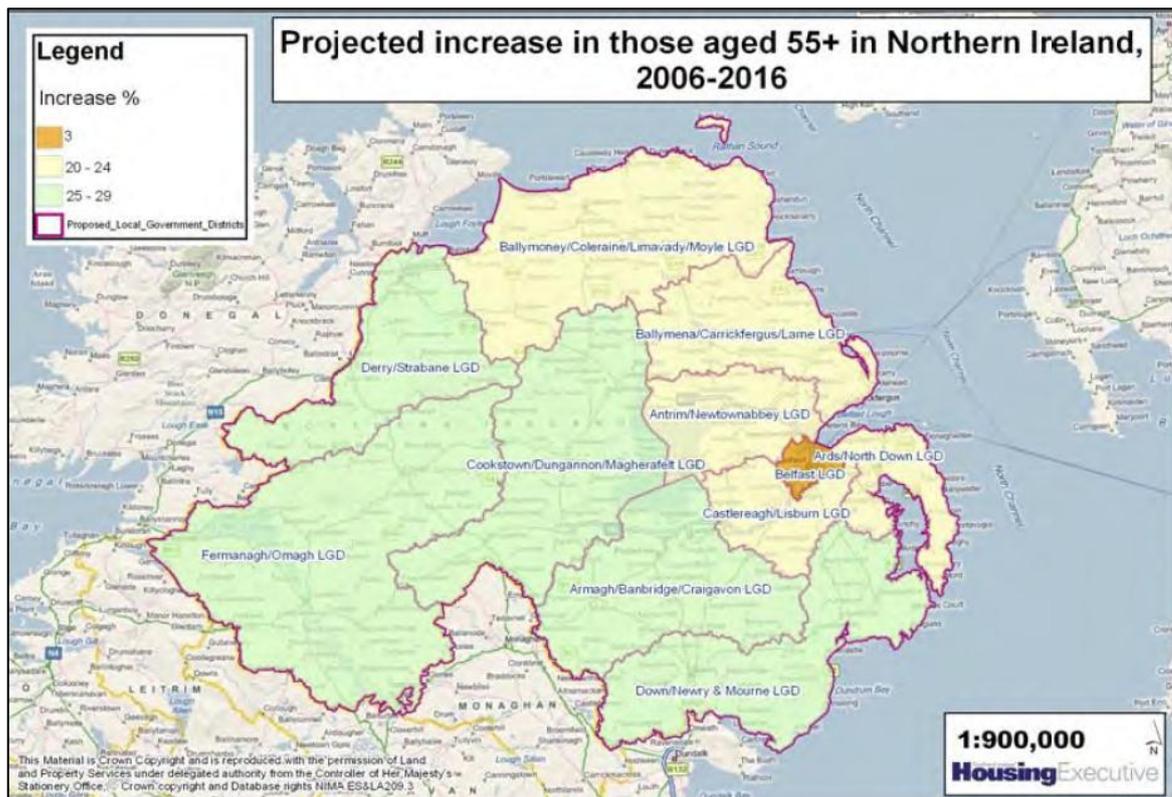
The Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey highlights the fact that there are a growing number of people who are living alone, as revealed in figure 3 below. It is particularly worth noting the fact the fact that proportion of people living alone aged between 16 and 59 has more than doubled since 1983. Whilst living alone does not mean that a person will automatically feel isolated it may well be a contributing factor, but would require further investigation. It should also be noted that there is no rural urban disaggregation available for this data at present, so it is impossible to determine if the trend for single households is more prevalent in rural or urban communities.

Figure 3: Household type within Northern Ireland – 1 adult aged 16-59 and 1 adult aged 60 or over 1983-2013<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.2 An ageing population

An additional and complicating factor to consider here is the projected ageing of the population in Northern Ireland up to 2016, with the greatest rises being mainly focussed in the rural west (see figure 4 below). An ageing rural population rise may increase the demand and rationale for retaining or developing new services, and by default potentially reduce some of the factors contributing to physical isolation. In this regard an ageing population does not necessarily lead to a more isolated community.

<sup>4</sup> [Household Type \(1983 to 2012-13\), Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey, Central Survey Unit, NISRA](#)

Figure 4: Projected increase in those aged 55+ in Northern Ireland 2006-2016<sup>5</sup>

It needs to be recognised that not all of the projected increases in those aged 55+ will be natural growth and will undoubtedly include migration, perhaps reflecting a willingness amongst some older people to avail of the perceived 'rural idyll'. Whilst this may be a conscious decision, the impacts on wider community life are harder to determine, as some of those moving to the countryside may choose to play a full role in community life whilst others may effectively choose not to engage or even be unable to as a result of a lack of time or connection to the area.

## 2.3 Poverty and income factors

### 2.3.1 Household income and poverty

Household income can have an impact on the levels of social mobility found within a community and by default the sense of isolation.

Research by the New Policy Institute published in March 2014 highlighted that between 2007/7 and 2011/2 the average (median) income<sup>6</sup> in Northern Ireland fell by almost 10% compared with 7% for the UK as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> NISRA 2006 based population projections 2006 to 2031 – map sourced from Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI)

<sup>6</sup> Income is measured after taxes and housing costs have been paid

A household is considered to be in poverty if its income is below 60% of the median income in that year and using this measure the New Policy Institute data reveals that with the exception of poverty amongst pensioners, Northern Ireland is witnessing an increase in the number of households living in poverty, and the rises are higher than those being experienced in GB.

Poverty rates here are also higher than those found in the rest of Ireland based upon the before housing costs measure from 2011, with 21% of people in Northern Ireland in poverty compared to 15% in the Republic of Ireland.

The specific issue of rural poverty in Northern Ireland was addressed by an earlier New Policy Institute research report published in 2012<sup>7</sup> which established that there was ‘...*substantial poverty in some rural areas*’. In specific terms the 2012 report 2006 - 2009/10 data established that the highest levels of poverty were found in the west of Northern Ireland with the full breakdown as follows:

- urban west – 23% of people in poverty;
- rural west – 23% of people in poverty;
- urban east – 17% of people in poverty;
- urban west – 17% of people in poverty; and
- Belfast – 20% of people in poverty.

### 2.3.2 Fuel Poverty

2013 OFMDFM commissioned research<sup>8</sup> into tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. The research produced estimates for the number of households affected by fuel poverty<sup>9</sup> which are set out in table 1 below, and reveal that Northern Ireland was more affected by the issue than the rest of the UK.

Table 1: Number and proportion of fuel poor households by country

Country	Number (millions)	Percentage	Year of estimate
England	3.20	15%	2011
Scotland	0.58	25%	2011
Wales	0.37	29%	2011
Northern Ireland	0.29	42%	2011

<sup>7</sup> [Tom MacInnes, Hannah Aldridge, Anushree Parekh and Peter Kenway, Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland 2012, New Policy Institute, 2012](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Christine Liddell & Susan Lagdon, Tackling Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland: An Area-Based Approach to Finding Households in most need, School of Psychology, Univeristy of Ulster, 2013](#)

<sup>9</sup> Fuel poverty defined as household which needs to spend more than 10% of its income on all fuel use and to heat its home to an adequate standard of warmth. This is generally defined as 20C in the living room and 18C in the other occupied rooms

The most recent Northern Ireland Housing Executive House Conditions Survey<sup>10</sup> from 2011 highlighted that fuel poverty affected 50% of households living in isolated rural areas in Northern Ireland.

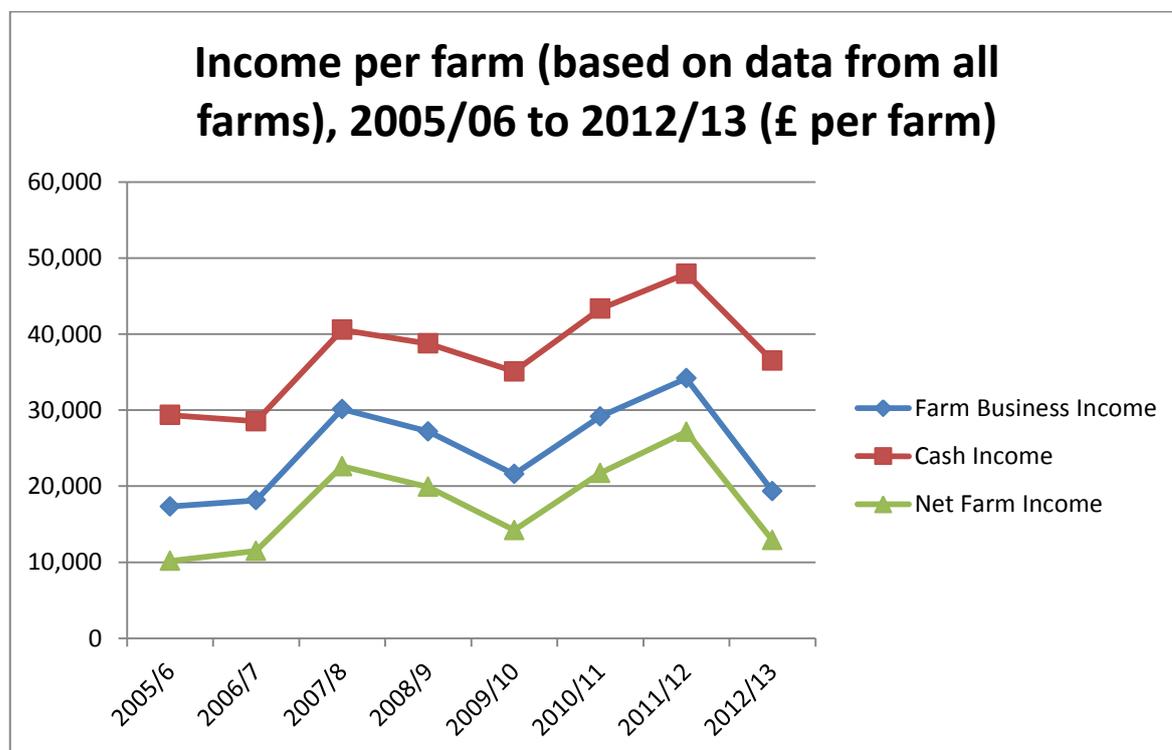
### 2.3.3 Farm incomes

Data from the DARD Farm Business Data Survey distinguishes between different types of income and has time series data over an extended period. The 3 different types of farm income and what they cover are as follows:

- **Farm Business Income** - FBI is the return to all unpaid labour (farmer, spouses and others with an entrepreneurial interest in the farm business) and to their capital invested in the farm business which includes land and buildings;
- **Cash Income** - cash receipts less expenditure; and
- **Net Farm Income** - the return to the farmer and spouse for their manual and managerial labour and tenant-type capital invested in the farm business.

The data in figure 5 shows the variation that can and has occurred in farm incomes. This variation could have undoubted impacts on farm families disposable incomes and ability to access services, education and employment.

Figure 5: Income per farm (based on data from all farms), 2005/6 to 2012/13 (£ per farm)<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> [Northern Ireland House Conditions Survey 2011, Northern Ireland Housing Executive](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland 2012/13, Policy and Economics Division, DARD, 2014, page 12 table 3](#)

### 3 Impacts of isolation/rural isolation on rural community and farmer welfare

The impacts of isolation/rural isolation on rural community/farmer welfare are hard to quantitatively and definitively measure.

What seems clear from the issues explored in this paper is that isolation/rural isolation can be a physical reality, a potential symptom of or contributor to poverty/low income, or all of these depending on the circumstances that communities and individuals within them are exposed to. One of the complications here is that issues, such as those identified in this paper, that could be perceived as adding to a sense or reality of isolation could impact on different individuals in different ways. It should also be noted that there may be individuals who find themselves isolated by choice rather than as a result of circumstances beyond their control, and who see isolation as a positive outcome.

With these caveats in mind there is evidence to suggest that isolation/rural isolation can have negative impacts on particular individuals. Table 2 below identifies some of the impacts that can occur as a result of isolation/rural isolation along with supporting academic evidence.

Table 2: Impacts of isolation/rural isolation

Impacts	Evidence
Mental health issues	<b>New Zealand-</b> research established that the most socioeconomically isolated groups within Auckland had 56% more anxiety/mood disorders compared to the least isolated <sup>12</sup>
Suicide	<b>Italy</b> – Study in Tuscany which established a positive correlation between rural isolation and suicide – particularly in relation to men. Also highlighted that income and educational achievement were key determinants for women <sup>13</sup> <b>England and Wales</b> - Possible indicators of social fragmentation, such as the proportion of single-person households in an area, were most strongly and consistently associated with rates of suicide in both urban and rural areas <sup>14</sup>
Lower life expectancy	<b>England</b> - research established a direct correlation between degree of social isolation and higher death risk. Those who were isolated from family and friends, had a 26% higher death risk over a seven-year period <sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Amber L. Pearson, Edward Griffin, Anna Davies, Simon Kingham, **An ecological study of the relationship between socioeconomic isolation and mental health in the most deprived areas in Auckland, New Zealand**, *Health & Place* Volume 19, January 2013, Pages 159–166

<sup>13</sup> Michele Arcangelo Martiello, Mariano Vincenzo Giacchi, **Ecological study of isolation and suicide in Tuscany (Italy)** *Psychiatry Research* Volume 198, Issue 1, 30 June 2012, Pages 68–73

<sup>14</sup> N. Middleton, J.A. Sterne, D. Gunnell, **The geography of despair among 15–44-year-old men in England and Wales: putting suicide on the map**, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 60 (2006), pp. 1040–1047

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Steptoe, Aparna Shankar, Panayotes Demakakos, and Jane Wardle, **Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women**, *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2013 Apr 9;110(15):5797-801. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1219686110. Epub 2013 Mar 25.

#### 4 Approaches to dealing with isolation and poverty – UK and Ireland

Table 3 below identifies approaches to the dealing with isolation and poverty across the UK and Ireland and also highlights whether these approaches recognise rural issues or include specific reference to farmers.

Looking at the data it seems apparent that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to a slightly lesser extent, have placed a greater emphasis on rural and farmer specific programmes which go above and beyond the potential provision and funding within Rural Development Programmes.

Table 3: Approaches to dealing with isolation and poverty across the UK and Ireland

Jurisdiction	Approaches employed	Rural dimension	Farmer specific
Northern Ireland	<p>Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Programmes administered by DARD in partnership with other government departments</p> <p><b>DARD Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework (APSI) 2008-11</b> – total spend of £10.2m (as of January 2014);</p> <p><b>DARD Targeting Poverty and Social Exclusion Framework 2011-2015</b> - total spend of £10.5m as of January 2014.</p> <p>These Frameworks have supported a number of dedicated measures including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ARTS - Assisted Rural Travel Scheme</li> <li>• Farm Families Health Checks</li> <li>• Mara - Access to Services, Grants and Benefits in Rural Areas</li> <li>• Rural Challenge Programme 2012/13</li> <li>• Rural Support</li> <li>• Rural Borewells</li> <li>• RYE - Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme</li> <li>• BOOST – Youth Employability Programme</li> <li>• CERI - Contacting Elderly Rural Isolated Project</li> <li>• Fuel Poverty Intervention</li> <li>• Community Development</li> </ul>	Yes – rural specific	Yes – farm families a key beneficiary and target group
	<p><b>Rural Transport Fund</b> – administered by DRD and supports Translink (Ulsterbus) to provide rural bus services in Northern</p>	Yes – rural specific	No – but farmers and farm families can and most probably do

	Ireland		benefit
Republic of Ireland	<p><b>National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-16</b> – cross cutting government action plan for dealing with social inclusion issues includes the following elements specifically targeted at rural communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural Transport Initiative - . Funding for rural transport services to a cash level of some €18 million.</li> <li>• Rural Social Scheme (RSS) - allows low-income farmers and fishermen to earn a supplementary income while, at the same time, benefits rural communities by maintaining and improving local amenities and facilities - Expenditure of some €214 million provided between 2007 and 2013 to benefit some 2,600 households</li> <li>• Broadband Programme - Total indicative investment over the period 2007-2013 of €435 million</li> <li>• Rural Development Programme – standalone but recognised as key component of wider plan,</li> </ul> <p><b>Farm Assist programme</b> - means-tested income support scheme for farmers. It is similar to Jobseeker's Allowance, but has a different means test – administered by the Department of Social Protection</p>	Yes – but covered as part of wider challenges facing Irish society	Yes – rural social scheme targeted low income farmers
England	<p>Commission for Rural Communities did undertake work looking to understand the issues linked to rural poverty, isolation and social exclusion – subsumed into DEFRA rural policy unit and harder to determine interest or actions on the issues.</p> <p>Wider government focus on child poverty but recognition in child poverty documentation that rural poverty can have unique traits.</p> <p>No evidence of specific national rural isolation programmes. Do appear to be localised projects with local government assistance trying to address issues. In line with Wales and Scotland, the Rural Development Programme is a key mechanism for addressing rural poverty</p>	Yes	Targeted beneficiaries under the RDP

	and isolation issues		
Wales	<p>Tackling Poverty Action Plan 2012-2016 recognises issues facing rural communities. Building Resilient Communities: taking forward the Tackling Poverty Action Plan<sup>16</sup> identifies a number of rural actions but there is a reliance on the Rural Development Programmes</p> <p>No evidence of specific national rural isolation programmes. Do appear to be localised projects with local government assistance trying to address issues</p>	Yes	Not named in Poverty Action Plan but would be targeted beneficiaries under the RDP
Scotland	<p>ACHIEVING OUR POTENTIAL :A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland – recognises rural challenges and issues</p> <p>Main mechanism for addressing rural poverty and isolation is the Rural Development Programme – similar to Wales in that there appear to be localised projects dealing with issues with local government assistance</p>	Yes	Not named in Poverty and income inequality framework but would be targeted beneficiaries under the RDP

## 5 Closing comments/conclusions

- The lack of clarity and consensus around what constitutes rural isolation means that there may be value in the Committee further exploring and ultimately committing to their own definition of the term prior to any further work in the Autumn;
- The concept of factors that contribute to rural isolation explored within this paper may have some further application in relation to both the identification of additional factors and may also assist the Committee in identifying potential witnesses and themes/questions that they might address;
- The inclusion of rural poverty within this paper has proven challenging as poverty could well be a symptom of rural isolation, a contributing factor or both. The fact that there is an undoubted relationship between the issues may well merit further investigation;
- As stated numerous times within the paper, many of the factors that can contribute to rural isolation can have very individual impacts, not all of which will be negative. This realisation makes the use of a prescriptive and all inclusive concept for rural isolation next to impossible, and emphasises the role that personal circumstance features such as age, education, income and level of social interaction can play in determining how isolated someone either is or feels;
- Whilst the nature of rural isolation and its associated impacts would seem to vary based on the factors assessed in this paper, it is clear that there will be individuals

<sup>16</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/publications/socialjustice/130703takeforpovactplanen.pdf>

who experience negative impacts such as mental health issues, the risk of suicide and potentially reduced life expectancy. Given these potentially negative impacts, the existence and even apparent growing impact of many of the potential causal factors identified within this paper such as the increases in people living alone may raise concerns going forward;

- Whilst the initial remit of this paper was to consider the impacts of rural isolation on farmer wellbeing it has proven impossible to disaggregate the impacts on farmers through rural isolation from those of the wider rural community. This reality merely reflects and highlights the fact that farmers are an integral part of the rural community and that many of the rural isolation factors identified will consequently affect farmers and wider rural community equally;
- The existing and exclusive mechanisms to address rural isolation and poverty within Northern Ireland stand apart from the approaches adopted in the rest of the UK and to a lesser extent the Republic of Ireland. Given this context there may be merit in further exploring the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.