

UK Government Agriculture Bill

Comments on UK Government Agriculture Bill

Rural Community Network, Rural Action and NI Rural Women's Network

For further information contact

Aidan Campbell

Policy officer

Rural Community Network

028 8676 6670

aidan@ruralcommunitynetwork.org

Background information on RCN, Rural Action and NIRWN

Rural Community Network

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. RCN has over 250 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Rural Action

Rural Action is a not-for-profit social purpose company established to meet an identified need for a regional rural delivery body with a focus project & programme design, development and implementation.

Rural Action seeks to inspire action and make a positive contribution to the everyday lives of rural people. It believes passionately about engaging people to build a better future. It will work to support *living, working, sustainable and shared communities*.

More specifically:

- It seeks to shape ideas into practical actions working within the team and with communities, partners and stakeholders to identify needs leading to the design and development of projects & programmes.

- It wants to spark creative ideas and answers to local issues through piloting and testing solutions and through the sharing and exchange of information.

NIRWN

NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) was established in 2006; NIRWN is a membership organisation with over 300 member groups and over 200 individual members.

NIRWN's mission is; to influence key decision makers through providing a voice and representation for rural women, ensuring their equal and valued position in society.

Objectives

- To increase the voice of rural women at a policy level
- To advocate and lobby on behalf of rural women
- To provide information and networking opportunities for rural women
- To represent rural women on the Women's Regional Consortium
- To pilot innovative projects to further the vision of rural women
- To hold statutory bodies to account to measure their impact on rural women

Comments on the UK Government Agriculture Bill

We welcome the invitation to submit evidence to the Committee on the UK Government Agriculture Bill.

RCN, Rural Action and NIRWN all have a keen interest in rural communities and rural development.

- RCN and NIRWN sit on the NI Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee; and
- Staff of Rural Action (formerly employed by the Rural Development Council) had previous representation on the Monitoring Committee, managed the NI Rural Network contract which was the networking structure for the Local Action Groups delivering the LEADER measures of the Rural Development Programme in NI. RDC was previously a delivery agent for the Programme.

Most of our comments relate to **Schedule 6 of the Bill** which relates to Northern Ireland:

- We support the need to retain a basic payment scheme in Northern Ireland.
- This will provide continuity for farmers and landowners until the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly agree how payments to farmers may need to change.
- This gives breathing space to consider the issues and how the “public money for public goods” principle will apply to the diverse range of farms across Northern Ireland.
- Direct payments are vital to sustaining small farms and make a big contribution to the economy in rural areas where money is spent locally by farmers and helps sustain a wide range of rural businesses.

We believe it is vitally important that Northern Ireland develops a future Rural Development Programme and that any future Programme meets the needs of rural communities here.

These are devolved issues and must be deliberated and agreed by the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly now that devolution is functioning. In our view it is vitally important that we consider how rural development will be facilitated post Brexit. We would welcome time for deliberation on how rural development policy and delivery can best meet the needs of rural communities.

In relation to the future of rural development we would make the following general points for committee members consideration:

- Rural development should remain a priority across Northern Ireland. This aligns with the top priority of the Executive to develop a regionally balanced economy.
- Rural development support may become even more important as farming evolves to meet ongoing environmental challenges and the need for farm diversification grows.
- Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to better align Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development policy outside of the two-pillar model of the CAP.
- Despite the challenges with EU funding the Rural Development Programme in Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to rural communities, to farming and to the environment. We know, for example, that under the current Rural Business Investment Scheme over 450 businesses have been supported.
- A broad-based community infrastructure has been developed right across rural NI and is having a significant impact on a wide range of issues that improve the quality of life for citizens. That needs to be invested in and built upon.
- We recognise there are ongoing challenges in rural communities however we also believe there are opportunities:
 - Just over a third of our population lives in a rural community. The population of rural areas is growing faster than that of urban areas. Between 2001-2017 rural populations grew by 18% in comparison to 6% for urban areas ¹.
 - In many rural communities we have developed thriving and innovative Small and Medium Enterprises. Micro & small businesses are particularly dominant and 94% of rural businesses are considered micro employing less than 10 people. These enterprises are an important part of the rural fabric contributing to a living, working countryside.

¹ source DAERA Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Statistics (2019)

- Farming will continue to evolve but will hopefully still produce quality food which can command a fair price for the producer and in a way that will protect and enhance the environment.
- Women have always played a key role in the development and sustainability of rural areas. In time of change in agriculture and rural communities, the work, innovations and entrepreneurial achievements of rural women is central to the future progress and viability of rural areas.

As we have already stated, the future objectives of rural development in Northern Ireland and the policies and mechanisms that deliver them will be agreed by the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly.

However, we believe it is **vitaly important that the views of stakeholders**, especially those in rural communities, are considered in line with the principles of co-design and co-production agreed by the parties as part of the New Decade New Approach priorities.

A further question that should be considered by the Committee is how provisions in the UK Agriculture Bill will interact with proposals for a UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and the work DAERA has begun on a Rural Development Policy Framework.

Our understanding, from a workshop for rural stakeholders held in Belfast in January last year is that the UKSPF will be the mechanism used to replace EU Structural Funds and will include a strand for rural development.

As far as we are aware no details of the operation of the UKSPF have been agreed but it was discussed in a House of Commons debate on 5th September 2019².

We are concerned that no policy proposals for the UKSPF have been put forward by the UK Government as these will shape the nature of rural development across the UK.

² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-09-05/debates/271970AC-2E89-497C-A24E-2F8FB77D50D9/UKSharedProsperityFund>

Furthermore, we are concerned from discussions at the Rural Stakeholder engagement event that there may be no ring-fenced funding element for rural development within the Fund.