



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Agriculture Bill: Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership;
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; Rural Action;
Rural Community Network

20 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr William Irwin

Witnesses:

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| Mr Conor Corr | Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership |
| Ms Louise Coyle | Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network |
| Ms Teresa Canavan | Rural Action |
| Mr Aidan Campbell | Rural Community Network |

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome you to the meeting this afternoon, Aidan, Teresa, Louise and Conor. It is great to see you here. I have had various engagements with you over the last number of years, so it is great to see you before the Committee to give evidence on the Agriculture Bill. I advise representatives that they have about 15 minutes to brief the Committee, and there will then be some questions. Whoever wants to kick off, go ahead.

Mr Aidan Campbell (Rural Community Network): Thanks to the Chair and members for inviting us today. A few words of background on our three organisations are in your papers, so I will not go into that, but I will say a wee bit about our expertise and why we are here. First, I welcome the invitation to submit evidence to the Committee on the Agriculture Bill. The RCN, Rural Action and NIRWN all have a keen interest in rural communities and rural development. RCN and NIRWN sit on the rural development programme (RDP) monitoring committee, and staff of Rural Action, formerly employed by the Rural Development Council (RDC), had previous representation on the monitoring committee managing the Northern Ireland rural network contract, which was the network and structure for the local action groups (LAGs) delivering the LEADER measures of the rural development programme in Northern Ireland. RDC was previously a delivery agent for the programme.

I will make some opening comments on behalf of the three organisations, Teresa and Louise will make a few additional points before handing over to Conor from the Mid Ulster LAG, and we will then open up to questions. Most of our comments will relate to schedule 6 to the Bill, which relates to Northern Ireland. First, 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 need to change. This gives breathing space to consider the issues and how the principle of public money for public goods will apply to the diverse range of farms across Northern Ireland. Direct payments are vital to sustaining small farms. They make a big contribution to the economy in rural areas, where money spent locally by farmers helps to sustain a wide range of rural businesses.

It is vital 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 on and agreed by the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly now that devolution is functioning. It is vital that we consider how rural development will be facilitated post Brexit, and we would welcome time for that deliberation on how rural development policy delivery can best meet the needs of rural communities.

On the future of rural development, the following general points are for Committee members' consideration. Rural development should remain a priority across Northern Ireland. This aligns, we think, with:

"A top priority of the Executive will be to develop a regionally-balanced economy".

Rural development and 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 the two-pillar model of the common agricultural policy (CAP). Despite the challenges with EU funding bureaucracy, the rural development programme in Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to rural communities, farming and the environment. We know, for example, that over 450 businesses have been supported by the current rural business investment scheme. A broad-based community infrastructure has been developed right across rural Northern Ireland 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 the ongoing challenges in rural communities. However, there are big opportunities as well. 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 and 2017, rural populations here grew by 18%, in comparison with 6% in urban areas. Many rural communities host a range of thriving and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Micro and small businesses are particularly important. Ninety-four per cent of rural businesses are considered to be micro, which means that they employ fewer than 10 people. Those enterprises are an important part of the rural fabric, contributing to a living, working countryside.

Farming will continue to evolve, but will, hopefully, still produce quality food that can command a fair price for the producer 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 times of change in agriculture and rural communities, their work, innovations and entrepreneurial achievements are central to the future progress and viability of rural areas.

As we 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 that it is vital that the views of stakeholders, especially those in rural communities, are considered in line with the principles of co-design and co-production that were 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 (SPF) and the work that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has already begun on the rural development policy framework. Our understanding from a workshop for rural stakeholders that was held in Belfast in January 2019 is that the UK shared prosperity fund will be the mechanism used to replace all EU structural funds, and that will include a strand for rural development. As far as we are aware, no details of the operation of the shared prosperity fund have been agreed, but it was discussed in a House of Commons debate on 5 September 2019. We are concerned that no policy proposals for the shared prosperity fund have been put forward by the UK Government, as those will shape the nature of rural development across the UK. Furthermore, we are also concerned, in light of discussions at that engagement event, that there may be no ring-fenced funding element for rural development in that fund.

I will hand over now to Teresa, who will make a few more comments.

Ms Teresa Canavan (Rural Action): Thanks, Aidan. Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the kind invitation to be here. I just want to add a couple of comments to what Aidan said about the future of the rural development programme and rural development policy. Members will be aware that we recently facilitated discussions with stakeholders at an event in Loughry in January. Indeed, I know that some of you were at that event. We held it on behalf of DAERA and very much welcomed that approach to engage with stakeholders at that early point. We commend the Department for engaging with stakeholders through a series of working groups and at that event. I highlight to the Committee the clear requirement that is emerging through those discussions and that engagement for a future rural development programme. You would expect us to say that, but I just want to highlight that it also came from stakeholders at that event.

Rural development, as you know, covers a wide breadth of activities, focusing on the rural economy, enterprise and entrepreneurship. It is about jobs, employment, health and well-being, addressing isolation, access to services, connectivity, villages. It is about a whole host of things. Essentially, it is about people and places, individuals, communities, farmers, farming families and everybody who is involved in the countryside. We need to ensure that farming does well. For farming to do well, it requires continued support, but, equally, we need rural society to do well. That is why we call for an agreed rural policy and framework for Northern Ireland. If we are to deliver collectively on the vision of a living, working, active landscape for all, we need policies that work for agriculture, the environment and rural society, and they should be complementary. As Aidan said, we see an opportunity now to align those policies more closely and to make them more relevant to the needs of rural communities here.

It seems, when reading schedule 6 to the Agriculture Bill, that it makes provision to extend the EU legislation to run out the current LEADER programme. That raises the question of what new programme will be needed going forward. We seek agreement for guaranteed funding for rural development, and we call for that to be ring-fenced in line with previous programmes. We also think that it is important that there is no gap between the programmes.

In support of what Aidan said, we are keen to support the Committee, the Minister and DAERA in taking forward that work. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

Ms Louise Coyle (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network): The Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) supports everything that Aidan and Teresa have shared with you. Our membership is rural women, and, in the past, successive rural development programmes have not managed to target women in the way in which they want to be targeted. The evaluations of those programmes state that very clearly. We see this as a potential opportunity for us to lead the way: to do something and do it differently. However, that needs to be done at the design end. Counting it at the end when the programme has already happened has consistently been proven not to work, as we have found.

On gender equality, DAERA has been a really great Department. It has excellent targets internally and externally and, through the LAG structure, has made a real effort to try to get a 50:50 gender balance. However, because of the programme's design, it did not really filter down to women being the beneficiaries. That was the case for young people as well, although women are our focus.

I put it out there that there is an opportunity, as well as all the problems that we clearly face as we leave the EU. Our members are very clear that rural communities are liable to suffer as a result of leaving the EU, and they are very worried. The rural development programme has supported viable rural society, and we now depend on that coming from the UK. We need a devolved voice in there because our rural communities are not the same as rural communities in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We share — Aidan outlined this very clearly — the UK shared prosperity fund. We were all at that meeting, and it was very clear that day that they had not even considered rural development, never mind rural development in a Northern Ireland context. They looked shocked that we were all interested and asking questions about that. That was certainly a red flag to us.

That is it really. Thank you all for your time and for inviting us today.

Mr Conor Corr (Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership): Thank you, Chair. I am Conor Corr from one of the local action groups, and I will talk about the delivery of the rural development

programme. First, I would like to thank you all for inviting us to submit orally. As you know, we submitted a short written paper, which I want to summarise quite quickly. I concur with everything said by Aidan, Louise and Teresa on behalf of their organisations, and we fully support their submissions.

I would like to focus on rural development programme delivery as part and parcel of our commentary on the UK Government's Agriculture Bill. The 10 local action groups, known as the priority leader groups or LAGs, are made up of local government partners, as you probably all know, and social partners, of which I am one. All 10 local groups are established as independent companies and are coterminous with the 10 local rural councils. Through the councils, each has a service level agreement on financial management etc with DAERA.

At present, there are 216 LAG board members: 116 are social partners, and 100 elected representatives work alongside them. The members have a keen interest in rural communities and rural development. They have invested many thousands of voluntary hours in working with the Department to deliver the programme. That has included assessing over 1,400 applications and providing representation on various bodies such as the NI rural development programme monitoring committee, the LEADER strategic forum, networks, subgroups, oversight committees etc.

LEADER, being the European community initiative for assisting rural communities in improving quality of life and economic prosperity, is the delivery mechanism through which £70 million was allocated to the NI RDP between 2014 and 2020, and that has been spent at a subregional level across the LAGs through the local rural development strategy. Included within that £70 million, £12.4 million has been spent on council administration to support the 10 LAGs in the 10 rural areas.

The aim of the LEADER approach is to increase the capacity of local rural communities, business networks and local representatives; to build knowledge, skills and innovation; and working cooperatively to tackle rural development objectives. This very successful approach has been adopted by successive NI Governments over the last 25 years, and it has been a prime agent in ensuring a thriving and increasingly cohesive rural area. I will not go into the general principles in detail, but serving a defined rural area and networking etc are examples of the programme's principles.

The rural development schemes are made up of rural business schemes, rural services, basic services, a rural broadband scheme and a village renewal scheme. In our commentary on the UK Agriculture Bill, we welcome this invitation. As a result of our experiences in the most recent programme and previous programmes, our participation and our cooperation with DAERA — previously, with DARD — in successfully delivering the rural development programme as far back as 1992, we believe that there is a need to develop a further rural development programme within a specific framework that meets the needs of the rural population and to deliver it using a LEADER-type approach. We support the Bill's intention to provide powers to a NI Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to agriculture policy and to modify existing EU legislation on rural development. We ask, for the record, that this include a delegation of power to include a new rural development programme as an outcome of the new rural policy framework for NI.

The UK Government's Agriculture Bill provides an opportunity for devolved government to design and deliver policy, and we ask that this be prioritised by Minister Poots and the Executive, under devolution, to develop and implement seamlessly a rural development programme post 2020. It is vital that the NI Executive consider how rural development would be facilitated and funded post 2020, and post Brexit, and use whatever powers are contained in the Bill to develop such a programme. We would welcome an indicative schedule and timetable on current deliberations on how rural development policy and delivery will best meet the needs of our rural communities. We concur with what Aidan said: it is important that the views of rural stakeholders are included and continue to be included, as exemplified by the workshops that Teresa referred to, which are currently conducted by DAERA as part and parcel of the rural development framework. We would welcome a further opportunity to cooperate in that valuable work. It is also important that the Executive require the UK Government to adopt the policy proposals for the shaping of rural development across the UK in a timely fashion, through the delegation of powers under this Bill or alternative mechanisms such as the UK SPF. Specifically, a new rural development programme must be included.

In my submission, you will find a number of highlights in relation to, for example, the delivery of the rural development programme to date. I will not go into detail, but it refers to how many letters of offer etc have been issued to date and the spread of spend. It also provides an example from mid-Ulster, which I will refer to specifically. A total investment of £16 million has been generated from a LEADER funding allocation of £8.3 million from the private, community and voluntary and council sectors. That is just across mid-Ulster. Ninety-five rural-based SMEs have been supported in business development

and expansion activities, which will lead to a total investment of £7.2 million. Over 900 employees are currently employed in those 95 businesses, and, as a result of that investment, there will be 230 additional new jobs, with 135 created to date. That is in mid-Ulster alone. That is just a flavour of what the rural development programme has done. Thank you for listening.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you very much for that insight and for making the effort to provide briefing papers and come here today. I am conscious that you, like me, do not live in or on the outskirts of Belfast and have travelled some distance to be here. I am very appreciative of that.

A number of members wish to ask questions, but I will start. Louise, you mentioned isolation. I know from the first meeting that I had with the Minister that he, I and, no doubt, the Committee see rural isolation and mental health as priorities. How has the support provided by rural development programmes targeted rural isolation or created opportunities to address issues of isolation in rural areas?

Ms Coyle: There is no doubt, given the amount of spend, that it has done that. However, I am not sure that that was ever the focus of any of the strands, even under the previous axis 3 and the current priority 6. I am sure that initiatives have had that at their core, and anything that engages rural people addresses social isolation. However, the likes of the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme, which clearly tries to tackle those issues, is probably a better model. That was kind of what I was saying. There is some thinking to be done in the design of the kind of programme that we want in order to create the kind of rural communities that we want. There is an opportunity in the future to do something a bit better. It is not acceptable that women continue to be an underrepresented group. To keep pointing it out is pointless unless you take some initiatives to address that. Things could have been done better. Still, I do not think that there was the flexibility or that it was the main thrust of the design of the rural development programme initiative.

Mr Corr: Louise refers to the TRPSI programme. In that programme, there were, most definitively, programmes targeted at isolation and social inclusion. A social prescribing scheme, for example, is being delivered through DAERA. Previously, a maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas programme (MARA) was about issuing invitations to people to ensure that their benefits etc were inclusive. Those were across rural areas and got into very small pockets of rural deprivation. There has been rural support, support for family farms and very strong community development infrastructure support. That programme targeted, more or less definitively, social inclusion and tackling isolation rather than priority 6. However, as Louise and Teresa have said, there is now an opportunity to ensure that the sorts of issues that we all know exist in rural areas are brought into the fold within the overall delivery.

Ms Coyle: These are small amounts of money in comparison with the rural development funding that has been coming in. As you all know, TRPSI has a tiny budget in comparison, yet its impact is huge, particularly in leveraging in extra money from other Departments and elsewhere.

Ms Canavan: The access-to-services and village regeneration measures in priority 6 have contributed to many facilities and community buildings that address isolation. However, I concur that we now have an opportunity to do things differently: to look at the best practice that TRPSI presented and the best practice under the rural development programme, and to combine those to do something great for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): In the Bill, there is the opportunity to create a successor programme. In government, there is a lot of emphasis on the principles of co-production and co-design. Do you believe that the LEADER methodology enshrines that? Would you like that to continue as the successor to the priority 6 programme?

Mr Corr: Absolutely. The LEADER approach is a bottom-up approach. It is about local people knowing within a defined strategic objective what the local needs are and addressing those at a local level through local plans. Yes, the approach has certainly proved valuable and very useful in the past. At the start of my presentation, I referred to the fact that I was one of 216 representatives, 116 of whom are social partners. All those thousands of hours of voluntary commitment to the programme are part and parcel of demonstrating the bottom-up approach. Yes, it has worked. It is much more effective and efficient than a top-down or a blow-in approach.

Ms Coyle: Particularly in the current programme, it has been very challenging to get enough women and young people on to the local action groups. You will all know that the technicality of the discussion, a lot of which comes from the EU stuff, is very legalistic, which, if it is your first meeting, is very off-putting. In the previous round, NIRWN did a lot of work with women to get them ready for the local action groups, and we did some mentoring as we went along. We did not have the human and monetary resources to do that this time, and I think that it really shows in the LAGs. Even in that bottom-up approach, look at what reflects our real society, who should be in the room and how do we support them to be in the room to tell us what they want and what they need.

Mrs Barton: Teresa, you spoke about rural policy and having a rural framework. Will you elaborate a little on what you would like to see in a rural framework? I will open that out to everybody to comment on.

Ms Canavan: It is a very good question. Rural development is such a broad subject. We would like to see actions or activities that support the rural economy; look at enterprise, entrepreneurship and innovation; support the health and well-being of rural citizens; look at community facilities; look at health and well-being issues; address employability and access to local jobs; and look at farm diversification. There is a breadth of activity, but it should cross social, economic and environmental strands. That is what we would like to see in a future rural development framework.

Mr Campbell: I will add to that, Rosemary, that the Department is already looking at the rural policy framework. You were at the event that day. It has identified urban/rural connectivity, rural tourism, entrepreneurship, employability, health and well-being, and social inclusion. Those are the headline themes that the Department is looking at. We cannot really speak for the Department. Its officials will probably present to the Committee at some stage on the work that they have developed to date. From the talk among the stakeholders on the day, it was a big event. A lot of people were there, and there was great engagement. At our table, people were conscious that there was scope within those themes to do many different things. The rural development programme cannot do everything for everyone in rural communities. It will be about trying to narrow it down to the actions, interventions and projects that will have the greatest effect on the largest number of people.

Mr Corr: That approach has been very proactive, and it is very timely. Our new rural development framework needs to be in place, and I give credit to the Department for putting in that effort. This relates to your question, Declan, about the approach. It has involved stakeholders at every level, right across all the workshops and conferences etc, and I expect that that will continue. That has been very much welcomed in the rural community.

Mrs Barton: What about the soft and hard infrastructure? What about broadband? I presume that you have talked about infrastructure, buses, etc?

Ms Canavan: Yes, absolutely. Aidan mentioned connectivity, and that came up very strongly at the event that we had. It underpins much of what goes on in rural communities. In that regard, it is about ensuring that we can get all Departments to work together because some of these things are not DAERA's responsibility, and we accept that. They will not fit into a rural development programme. It is about how we can work better and align the policies to create our vision. We need to look at how we align other policies and other Departments in order to address those issues.

Mr Irwin: You are very welcome. I was a member of a LAG some years ago when I was on the council, so I saw the good work that they do and how they deliver. Does the £70 million from 2014 to 2020 run out at the start or the end of this year? I presume that the programme will work until the end of 2020.

Ms Canavan: Yes. That is for the duration of the programme from 2014 to 2020, and there will be expenditure beyond that.

Mr Irwin: Will all of the £70 million that was allocated be used?

Ms Canavan: It is on target, as far as we know.

Mr Corr: Yes, it is on target. It might be better to refer questions on spend, commitment and job creation to departmental officials.

Mr Irwin: Sometimes, it is very difficult to know what is part of the system and what is not. Things can leap out of the system at the last minute.

Mr Corr: Yes. There is an opportunity. There is a commitment to date — at what level I am not able to say — but there is commitment to date, and we expect full expenditure to take place by the end of next year, I think.

Mr Irwin: Up to 2021. OK.

Mr Blair: I put on record our thanks to the Department and to those here today for the event at Loughry, which was very good and informative. Rosemary's question went some of the way that mine will go. We acknowledge, as Teresa acknowledged, that some of the areas up for discussion are not strictly DAERA responsibilities. They include the well-being and health element; hard infrastructure, which is for the Department for Infrastructure; and an economic strategy, which is obviously for the Department for the Economy. What is the best way to deliver that interdepartmental approach? Is it through the LAGs? Does it need another structure? How can we ensure that all Departments are applying themselves to the issues where and when it matters? How do we deliver that, in your opinion? All of us have to discuss these things, but I am keen to know what you think is the best way to go about this.

Mr Corr: To date, this Department has shown leadership.

Mr Blair: The lead Department?

Mr Corr: Yes. It has piloted a lot of schemes that have been taken on. We have talked about small transport programmes. Those have been taken on by that Department. Mental health, rural mental health and such issues have come much more to the fore. Particularly through the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme, the Department has dipped its toe in the water by looking at pilot schemes in various areas and has managed to create partnerships with other Departments. In my view, DAERA has already started that, and I hope that that will continue and other Departments will take on sole responsibility of delivering for those areas that clearly lie within their ambits. In agriculture and rural development, the issue is that disciplines and beneficiaries are from rural areas, because it highlights the fact that there are accentuated issues in those areas.

Ms Coyle: None of us here is under any illusion. Our Departments have not always worked well together. The challenge for the Assembly is to find where there are synergies and where Departments can save money by complementing what each other does by somebody giving a bit and somebody else giving another bit. That is the challenge for the Assembly. Clearly, it seems that there is not enough money in the pot for everything, so how do we go about it? Communities — particularly rural communities — are excellent at doing that. We have had to do it because we have been so under-resourced. We all work together. That is probably why our four organisations are all sitting here. We have to find ways to work together, and the Assembly has to do that. When you are looking at a rural development programme, there should be somebody from each Department at any meeting. They could each say, "We are already doing a bit on this" and "We were hoping to do that". That has to happen. There is no question about that.

Mr Campbell: It is a good question, but it is really difficult for us to answer. Some of it is down to leadership from the Executive. I know that it is very early days for the new Executive. Ministers must work together and deliver across the needs of rural areas and across Departments. The Rural Needs Act was passed in 2016. The second monitoring report, which DAERA compiled, was released in December. In our view, that could work better and deeper. It will take time to embed that in Departments. That is starting to trickle out. The monitoring report this year is more comprehensive than in the first year. These are big issues. It is a huge challenge and, for us — for our organisations certainly and probably for others — it comes down to the idea of balanced regional development, which is an Executive priority. If we want to achieve that, we will have to think about how we deliver public transport, health services and education. Every organisation will have to try to think about that and have really difficult conversations. Rural citizens see that, and when they read that health services need to be reconfigured, they immediately think that the local hospital is under threat. Those are difficult conversations for anyone, and certainly for politicians, citizens and people in rural constituencies.

If we are thinking about reconfiguring health, we need to talk to the Department for Infrastructure about how to ensure that we have the network — the road and ambulance infrastructure — so that citizens can still access services that we taking away from more peripheral parts of rural Northern Ireland. There may be a clear clinical argument for consolidating health services; the stroke care consultation last summer attracted a lot of public interest. Considering the Bengoa recommendations and the way that services are going, which has been clearly flagged up in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, these will be difficult conversations, but they can happen only if Department of Health officials are talking to Department for Infrastructure officials. I have strayed a bit off topic, so apologies for that.

Mr Blair: We are not straying really; we are only starting to tie things together. I am sure that all of you would agree that, regardless of the configuration of the collaboration and co-design — whether DAERA leads generally or DOH leads on health matters etc — on all the things that are in New Decade, New Approach, which, by the way, does not mention the word "rural" once — the Departments should talk to you before the co-design about what will be best received and easiest to deliver.

Ms Canavan: Some of that work has started through the rural framework that we mentioned. There are working groups, and we had rural stakeholder events, so a body of evidence is starting to grow on what that should look like. That is useful to note.

Mr Corr: That bottom-up approach is probably the best way to ensure that you engender all the ideas and issues before bringing them into the Department for consideration. Aidan mentioned rural needs, and community planning is also important. It is important to have effective delivery of local community plans and an up/down approach, whereby you are linking with the Executive.

Ms Bailey: It is good to see you here and hear you mention community planning, which is what was in my head. Hearing that rural communities have seen an 18% growth in population in recent years has left me a bit shocked or stunned as I would never have put the figure so high. With that in mind, obviously local councils have a great part to play. I imagine that a lot of development and housebuilding is going on to attract new people, and planning powers lie with local councils. That impacts on local community infrastructure, including your roads, schools and healthcare facilities. I live in south Belfast, and I know that sometimes those aspects of infrastructure do not go hand in hand in planning, so I imagine that causes a lot of added stress in your local areas.

I will come back to what John was getting at in his questions: the co-design element is important. I 100% agree that you need ring-fenced funding, and it is really disappointing that we are not even looking at that in the Bill discussions. If there were a ring-fenced budget, is there a framework, discussion paper or agreed plan of action that you would like to see?

Ms Canavan: That work is ongoing with the Department. It has engaged stakeholders, and there was a stakeholder event. There is a development framework, which would need to be discussed further with the Department.

Mr Campbell: The plan is for that to go out to full public consultation later in the year, so the Department will bring that here; I think that it is aiming for late spring.

Mr Corr: It is quite inclusive in the areas that it looks at, including connectivity and social inclusion, which were not part and parcel of the previous or current rural development programmes. It is looking at those areas that TRPSI and the rural development programme worked on together. It is probably a more generic approach to all the issues in rural areas.

Ms Bailey: My knowledge of TRPSI is quite limited. I am on catch-up here. We can have a rural development plan and, yes, different Executive bodies or Departments will be tasked with different things — for example, Infrastructure, Health or DAERA. Were those plans led with others feeding into them? Did they have a lead? We can be a lead or the Department can be a lead on coming up with the rural development plan, and then you can have Infrastructure committed to budgetary plans on transport, and Education and Health will have their inputs. Is it one central plan?

Ms Coyle: That seems to be the vision at the minute. Is it?

Ms Canavan: Historically, we have been working to the EU framework. Essentially, there was a menu of activities at an EU level that we bid in and delivered under LEADER. That was done in isolation from other Departments, it is fair to say, because it was a specific programme designed at a European level. The opportunity is there now to look at how we do that differently and how we can integrate those other Departments. That is the future vision that we have to consider. Ultimately, previously, it was done at an EU level and then the schemes were delivered locally. The local action groups developed a plan locally, but it was against a prescribed list of measures that they then delivered locally. It was not integrating with other Departments, but there is an opportunity to do that now.

Mr Campbell: Through TRPSI, a tradition has been started on that with the different schemes that the Department initiated. There was the MARA project, which was about benefit uptake and ensuring that people knew all the benefits they were entitled to, and community services was a partnership project between DAERA and the Public Health Agency. There was an assisted rural transport scheme, which was around funding to community transport partnerships to enable people who are eligible to use SmartPasses and community transport to be linked in with the public transport hub. That was a fantastic, very innovative scheme. We have heard academics from the UK say, "This is a really brilliant programme". It is still being funded and, for us, those types of schemes are providing practical solutions for people in rural communities. They are really valuable and speak to the issue of isolation, which we talked about.

Mr Corr: Aidan mentioned one word: "innovative". The TRPSI programme is very innovative. It is not as prescriptive as the rural development programme, but the opportunity is there now to look across those delivery mechanisms at how the Department, working in collaboration and partnership with local communities, where there is a strong infrastructure, and local voluntary organisations can deliver at a local level on whatever needs are found in particular areas. Where I live — the Cookstown, mid-Ulster, Dungannon area — will most certainly be different from Fermanagh and north Antrim, but there will be similarities from a generic strategic approach, and the Department can provide programmes and projects under this Bill or any alternative Bill to allow local needs to be met — for example, through those innovative TRPSI programmes. TRPSI had a very small budget. I think that it was only £3 million to £4 million vis-à-vis £70 million to £80 million of RDP moneys.

Ms Coyle: Even the fact that there was a justification for that programme is evidence that the rural development programme, as it was, did not really, with all that money, address those issues.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We are steering off the Agriculture Bill when we talk about TRPSI, but I am very familiar with it. It is a really good example of where a relatively small amount can go a long, long way.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much for your presentation. I found it very interesting. You expressed concern about the UK shared prosperity fund, and, in some of our earlier conversations today, the topic of a separate Northern Ireland agriculture Bill arose. If there were a separate Northern Ireland agriculture Bill, do you see your role being met more easily in that as opposed to trying to raise your concerns through the UK Agriculture Bill?

Mr Campbell: Potentially, yes. We have access to Committees like this, MLAs and councillors, who will have access to people who are making decisions. We could have access to departmental officials. I suppose you cannot talk about UK shared prosperity fund proposals because they have not even come out yet. We felt that we, as small voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland, could have no way of influencing that debate at a UK-wide level, so having something closer to Northern Ireland, by its nature, means that we will at least be engaged in the conversation and know some of the decision makers engaged in the debate. My instinct is yes.

Ms Canavan: My only comment to add is this: as long as the Bill is extended sufficiently to cover rural development as well as agriculture, because the two should sit well beside each other. As long as it covers the aspects of rural development that we are talking about.

Mr M Bradley: It would give you a more accessible avenue to explore those opportunities.

Mr Campbell: Yes, definitely.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you for your representation. I should say, on the back of Maurice's question, that we will furnish the Department with our findings from the evidence that you

presented and, indeed, all the deliberations in the context of the Agriculture Bill. We will also feed that into the House of Lords EU Committee, which we are meeting on Tuesday. I seek the Committee's agreement to forward the research paper and all the Hansard reports of the proceedings relating to the Agriculture Bill to the House of Commons Agriculture Bill Committee. If the Committee is OK with that, we will feed all that in.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Listen, you have us here, but we will also feed it into the Executive, the Minister and the Departments, as well as the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

I take this opportunity to thank you — Conor, Aidan, Teresa and Louise — for coming up here today. Do not be strangers. You are always welcome back.

Ms Canavan: Thank you for having us.

Mr Campbell: Thanks very much.