

**ARD Committee Call for Evidence
Submission: Rural Needs Bill**

Response to Rural Needs Bill

1. Summary

- NICVA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ARD Committee's call for evidence on the Rural Needs Bill and welcomes the Bill's progression to committee stage.
- NICVA welcomes DARD's commitment to make rural proofing as robust as possible to ensure better outcomes for rural citizens across Northern Ireland.
- NICVA strongly believes that the statutory duty to cooperate is imperative to achieve effective cross departmental working and welcomes DARD's inclusion of it within the Bill.

2. Introduction

NICVA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ARD Committee's call for evidence on the Rural Needs Bill and welcomes the Bill's progression to committee stage. Despite the Executive's commitment to rural proofing since 2002 and reaffirmed in 2009, our rural member organisations have stated that this has been inconsistently administered across departments and there is very little evidence to say that rural proofing has achieved an impact. NICVA welcomes DARD's commitment to make rural proofing as robust as possible to ensure better outcomes for rural citizens across Northern Ireland. We also welcome the statutory footing given to departmental cooperation on this issue. NICVA strongly believes that the statutory duty to cooperate is imperative to achieve cross departmental working. NICVA believes that only through a change in the hard wiring of government and placing cooperation on a statutory footing, can working without silos really be achieved.

NICVA held the first Agriculture and Rural Development Departmental Monitoring Group (DMG) on 26th August in collaboration with Rural Community Network. The DMGs replaced NICVA's original thematic Policy Fora earlier this year. By mirroring the structure of government as it is, these groups provide a more robust role in assessing how each department is impacting on the people, families and communities they work with. The meeting welcomed a briefing from Astrid Stuart on the Rural Needs Bill. Members voiced a number of concerns about the Bill as it stands.

3. Issues

Members were concerned that the Bill did not go far enough in compelling departments to act on rural disadvantage. The Bill as it stands only asks others departments to 'consider' rural needs. We understand that if departments were compelled to act to mitigate against every rural disadvantage, the Bill could have huge fiscal implications. However, we would urge the department to make 'consideration' stronger. A possible way to do this would be to change it to 'have due

regard to' or to ensure a rural impact assessment is carried out. Furthermore we would urge the department to include a reference to the need to take reasonable steps to mitigate adverse impact when adverse impact is identified. The inclusion of the phrase reasonable steps aims to balance the need to mitigate adverse impacts in rural areas with the reality that public authorities have limited budgets.

It is crucial to the success of the Bill and for the needs of rural dwellers that training is provided across all departments. This would ensure there was consistency in the approach and that officials are supported in carrying out their new role effectively.

Members raised some concerns about how enforcement would be carried out across departments and who would be responsible for ensuring that departments upheld their responsibilities. A training programme would contribute to this as could a stronger role for the NI Ombudsman as a potential avenue/mechanism to hold departments to account. This may also change with the departmental restructure post May 2016 and a new role for the Executive department.

Conclusion

NICVA are keen that the Rural Needs Bill passes its Final Stage to ensure rural proofing is given a statutory footing. This will ensure that decision makers in public authorities consider the impact on rural citizens of any new policy or change to policy or service delivery at an early stage.

We recognise the work of the Department to date in getting the Bill to this stage and hope that through the remaining stages of the Bill that members can work together constructively to produce legislation that will have concrete impact for rural citizens.

Contact

Jenny McEneaney, Policy Development Officer, NICVA
jenny.mceneaney@nicva.org
028 9087 7777

Background to NICVA

NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.

NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

For official use only:

Date Received: 26/11/2015

Ref Number: RNB Sub17

