

DEPARTMENTAL CO-ORDINATION UNIT



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Stella McArdle
Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Dear Stella

RURAL NEEDS BILL

Thank you for your letter of 9 November 2015 on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development regarding the proposed Rural Needs Bill.

The Department welcomes the proposals contained in the draft Bill and notes the clarification provided by the Bill in relation to the encouragement of the promotion and requirement for Departments and other Local Authorities to consider the issue of rural proofing when considering the development of policy and related legislation.

Duties of public authorities to consider rural needs

Officials note the intention to introduce a duty to take into account the needs of people living in rural areas when developing and implementing policies and the responsibility this would place on this Department in common with other Government Departments and Local Authorities to ensure that rural needs are fully considered in the policy making process.

Monitoring and reporting

Should the Bill, pass the Department also notes that it must, if so directed by the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, compile information relating to the

exercise of the duty to consider rural needs and submit that information to DARD as part of an annual reporting process relating to rural needs.

Co – Operation with other bodies

Finally, should the Bill pass, the Department notes that the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development can make arrangements with other Departments to secure co-operation on exchanges of information between public authorities.

The Department notes that the matters highlighted by the Bill are already informally considered by us as part of policy and legislative processes. The proposed Bill would put such arrangements on a more formal footing and this Department will draw on this information to assist DARD in meeting their obligations under the proposed Bill, once passed.

Translink were consulted on the Bill and its input is below. There is no doubt that any statutory duty placed on Translink or the Department in respect of rural proofing (as set out in the Bill) will have potential budgetary implications. It may also have implications for the contract between the Department and Translink and changes in service delivery. In addition, it would have implications for any change in funding arrangements affecting the Rural Community Transport Partnerships.

Specific comments on the Bill's clauses

Clause 1 – Duty of Public Authorities to consider rural needs (including the proposed extension to NDPBs)

- It is important that any additional bureaucracy around the bill does not divert resources from service delivery, particularly during this time of constrained budgets.
- This is particularly relevant when extension of the Bill to NDPBs/ALBs is being considered. After all, these bodies require autonomy to manage their business whilst considering their social obligations.
- Clarity around the definition of rural is key.

- PfG development should be cognisant of rural issues and assist Public Authorities in delivering a balance between rural and urban investment/resources. Surely this needs to be reflected here?

Clause 2 – Guidance, advice and information

- Guidance and advice will be key to ensure that the issues highlighted above are adequately addressed.
- Delivery of awareness training by DARD would be welcomed.
- The main focus here should be about cutting through any potential bureaucracy, while at the same time ensuring rural needs are considered.

Clause 3 – Monitoring and Reporting

- These need to be measured and utilise existing information where possible. Surely DARD should collate information or develop templates for capturing information in liaison with Public Authorities, instead of imposing reporting requirements on them. The comments above relating to Clause 1 apply here too.

Clause 4 – Co-operation with other bodies

- Not sure whether this relates to DARD's current role to promote rural issues in general or whether this is something new.

The content of this letter is fully disclosable under FOI.

Yours sincerely

[SIGNED]

ALAN DOHERTY
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer