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**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Written Submission on:**

Written submission

RURAL NEEDS BILL

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development
(DARDNI)

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NIRWN

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1 Introduction

1.1 NIRWN's vision is a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

NIRWN key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme, funded by DSD and DARD to give a voice to rural women

Mission

NIRWN's mission, as a rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

1.2 NIRWN, as a member of the Women's Regional Consortium funded through DSD, welcome the opportunity to submit our views and comments regarding the Rural Needs Bill.

COMMENTS:

2.0 General/Context

NIRWN welcome the proposal of a Rural Needs Bill and offer our support to the Committee and the Minister to ensuring its adoption and implementation going forward.

2.1 Rural Proofing

It is clear that Rural Proofing as an Executive commitment is not making tangible differences to policy making and development for rural citizens that it was hoped it would. NIRWN believe that rural proofing must begin on a statutory footing, such as the Rural Needs Bill, if it is to be taken seriously and implemented.

2.2 Policy Development for Rural Citizens

As an organisation with a remit to respond to NI Executive policies on behalf of rural women we regularly observe policy documents which have clearly not been 'rural proofed' as per the guidance from DARD¹ which asks that all new policies and programmes be rural proofed at the '*outset of your policy development*'. We can cite numerous examples of Consultation documents that would have benefited from rural proofing and where a Rural Needs Bill would have potentially made a difference to policy development. A current example is; the OFMDFM Consultation on Delivering Social Change through Childcare, A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025 which did not complete a Rural Issues Statement. Childcare has clear barriers in rural areas that differ from our urban counterparts and a ten year strategy absolutely needs to take account of these. It is hoped in response to consultation submissions this will be rectified in a final Strategy however, rural proofing from the '*outset*' rather than after the fact would have improved this and many other draft documents. The onus for 'rural proofing' inevitably falls to organisations such as ourselves at consultation stage, which is far from ideal. NIRWN believe that a statutory footing would support the development of looking at policy developments and revisions with a rural lens; in much the same way as S75 has done for equality.

¹ <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/guide-to-rural-proofing.pdf>

2.3 Cross Departmental Responsibility for Rural

The failure to take into account the needs of rural citizens in policy development inevitably has long term implications subsequently in budgeting for the policy implementation. NI has a rural population of 37% but 37% of Departmental budgets are not spent rurally; it is our experience when advocating for 'rural' that Departments often consider rural issues to be the business and responsibility of DARD alone. This is of course a crude breakdown of how spend is calculated but certainly if rural needs are not identified they are cannot be budgeted for.

2.4 Implementation

NIRWN know that implementation is essential to the success of a Rural Needs Bill and a Bill on its own will not create change. It is our belief that a statutory footing gives it a much better chance of success. The status quo is not delivering for rural citizens and it is time to try something new. In consultation with our membership in February 2015 on the Rural Proofing Bill; the message we received was that, a Bill would provide a platform not currently in place; for organisations and individuals to engage with Departments and statutory agencies, councils etc on their rural proofing decisions or, evidence of taking rural needs into account. A Rural Needs Bill is not asking for special treatment for rural but rather; the development of awareness that rural citizens often experience life differently to our urban neighbours and we would like policy development, implementation and budgeting to take account of this. Rural citizens deserve no less.

3.0 Rural Needs Bill-Examination of Clauses

Note: NIRWN preface all comments on the examination of clauses with the fact that we do not have legal expertise; our suggestions are based on our lay interpretation of the Bill.

Duty of public authorities to consider rural needs

1. (1) *Delete “consider” and insert “have due regard to”*

Public authorities, under this wording of the duty, may well consider rural needs but having considered them are not compelled to act differently as a result. We are concerned that the Duty to consider rural needs could, in many cases, lead to a rural impact assessment being carried out without any substantial adjustment to the delivery of policy and programmes in rural areas. To “have due regard to” may require public authorities to take the issues associated with rural needs more seriously.

If the insertion of “*have due regard to*” rural needs cannot be agreed then we would suggest that, as an alternative, the clause “*carry out and give effect to a rural impact assessment*” be inserted in brackets after the clause “*consider rural needs*”.

1. (1) (a) *insert the word “budgets” after strategies.*

We believe that public authorities should also be required to consider rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising budgets.

1. (1)(b) *A further clause should be inserted after clause (b) “where adverse impact is identified public authorities should take reasonable steps to mitigate such impacts.”*

NIRWN is concerned that the Bill does not refer to the need to mitigate against adverse impact in rural communities where adverse impact is identified. We recognise the budgetary constraints that all public authorities operate under but believe that without reference to the need to mitigate adverse impact there is a risk that the “consideration of rural needs” will not lead to any significant change for rural citizens.

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.

1. (2) (c) *A further clause should be added “arms length bodies”*

We believe it is important to state that arms length bodies, many of which carry out significant functions on behalf of government departments should be specified on the Bill.

Guidance, advice and information, etc.

2. (a) *Insert the word “training” after advice.*

The Bill should make explicit the need for training provision for those officials from public authorities charged with carrying out the duty.

Monitoring and reporting

3. (2) *An additional clause should be inserted stating that “The Minister must make an annual statement of their assessment of the impact of the Rural Needs Bill to the Assembly.”*

We believe this additional step should be inserted as our understanding that the current clause which states that a copy of the annual report is to be laid before the Assembly means that any report compiled on rural proofing will be lodged in the Assembly library. Requiring a Ministerial statement to the Assembly will add an extra layer of accountability and transparency to the process.

Interpretation

6. We are concerned as to whether the definition of “rural needs” as set out in the Bill currently to mean “the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas” is sufficiently clear to enable public authorities to discharge the duty.