



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting us to speak with you in your consideration of the Rural Needs Bill. We are indeed honoured and welcome this engagement. The Local Rural Support Networks are a Northern Ireland wide infrastructure delivering the Rural Community Development Support Service (RCDSS) for DARD under the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework – we have outlined who we are in the briefing paper attached to this submission. We draw membership from a wide range of community and voluntary sector organisations such as generic community groups, social economy, playgroups, farmers, women, youth, disability, ethnic minority and older people's groups. We are widely recognised as providing an essential conduit between rural communities and statutory bodies providing communities with access to decision makers and a channel into expert local knowledge on the ground.

We appreciate that the Executive, in their Rural White Paper Action Plan, has a vision for a

“fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life as all others in the region”

Furthermore we are conscious of the Executive’s commitment to rural proofing in 2002 and 2009 and the consequent endeavours to rural proof policy. However this appears to be failing our rural areas evidenced by more and more services being depleted. We welcome wholeheartedly the introduction of a Rural Needs Bill as it will take account of rural issues at policy inception and therefore be intrinsic in policy development. We believe that the Rural Needs Bill will ensure that policy decisions take account fully of rural areas and that decision makers should be held accountable. We want to see the Bill strengthened and as robust as possible to ensure better outcomes for rural people.

Comments on the wording of the Bill

In commenting here please note we are speaking without legal guidance and knowledge so these are our opinions:

Duty of public authorities to consider rural needs

A public authority must ~~consider~~ **give due regard** to rural needs when....: we feel the word consider does not carry enough weight. A public authority may well consider rural needs but not act on them. Considering rural needs could 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) developing, adopting, implementing, **monitoring** or revising policies, strategies and plans **and budgets**. Whilst monitoring might be implicit we wish it to be more explicit, likewise service delivery is dependent on budget allocation so we want to see rural areas receiving their fair share

1. b) designing and delivering public services **and where adverse impact is identified public authorities should take reasonable steps to mitigate such impacts.**

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 any other person specified in an order made by the Department

We appreciate that the Bill will start with Government Departments and Councils but we are keen to hear which organisations exactly the bill will extend to? We appreciate there will be further consultation on this and we will await this with interest but at this stage will Arms Length Bodies be included – they carry out significant functions on behalf of Government bodies and we would like to see them included.

Guidance, advice and information, etc.

2 The Department ~~may~~ **will** take such steps as appear to it to be appropriate to-

a) provide any person with guidance, **training**, advice and information about issues connected with rural needs or ways of meeting

those needs

3 Monitoring and reporting

We want to be sure that the Bill is being effective on an ongoing basis so can this section be strengthened in some way. We appreciate there are no sanctions envisaged for non compliance but how can the committee ensure public bodies will take their responsibilities seriously? A copy of the report being laid before the Assembly – can this be more transparent? We understand that “laid before” means the report being lodged in the Assembly library and feel this is not transparent in itself.

Add - **the minister to provide an annual statement to the assembly on the impact of the Rural Needs Bill** so that there is a continual review and it is being aired/discussed as a live issue on the floor of the Assembly.

4 Co-operation with other bodies

The Department must make arrangements with public authorities with a view to securing co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities **to highlight good practice**

6 Interpretation

Rural needs means the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas – does this take account of needs such as: health, housing, education and environmental? Can there be more clarity in this in the Bill.

Comments and an example

To date rural proofing has not been working consistently across government. It is left to the discretion of each Department because it is a voluntary commitment. Our experience of policy decision making is that rural proofing is often not given a high priority. This is not fair on rural dwellers.

If we look at multiple deprivation measures and in particular access to services – invariably these are all rural areas. Owenkillew for example ranks number 1 in terms of deprivation due to access to services yet the Western Health & Social Care Trust wish to remove day care services from the village of Gortin and move old, frail and vulnerable clients to a village a further 8 miles away. If this decision goes ahead this will have a huge impact on families and because of their conditions and physical ailments existing clients will not travel this additional journey. Rural proofing is not working here! Looking at one specific example of an elderly man with dementia and other complex needs who lives in a rural area outside Gortin his family say “By going to Gortin Day Centre he has independence away from his family, can socialise with old friends and be stimulated by various activities”. Caring for a relative who has dementia on a daily basis is a stressful situation as the person needs 24 hour support. “As much as we value our time with Peter (not his real name) we also value time apart from him.” Gortin Day Care Centre is the only facility locally that can address and accommodate Peter’s dementia. It provides him with a social outlet and he is treated with dignity and respect and enabled to have some independence. For the family this is priceless. He may not be capable of travelling the extra distance as he finds journeys increasingly long and tiresome. If the facility closes Peter may be confined to his home and without the structured activities he would be bored and frustrated and this will put added stress on his family.

This follows through for other health care provision in rural areas. Individuals with complex needs need concrete help so that they can live out their days in the community. Taking Peter’s example, when the family ask for help they are frequently told “We are unable to help you at present as you live in a rural area and it is very challenging getting help to your area.” This family and many like them in other rural areas feel discriminated against because of their postcode. A Rural Needs Bill should help here to ensure that the local HSCT take account of rural geography in designing and delivering services so that patients can avail of the same care packages and services that patients living in an urban

area.

As Local Rural Support Networks we speak for our membership on policy and more strategic matters. We engage with our members on a daily basis and are all too acutely aware of the needs in rural areas. So we trust it gives the committee some comfort that in speaking to us you are hearing the needs of local communities. Local Rural Support Networks have been successful to date in attracting rural dwellers to consultations and we welcome co-planning and co-delivery for any future planned consultations to maximise participation of rural dwellers

Conclusion

The Local Rural Support Networks are keen to see the Rural Needs Bill passed to ensure public authorities adequately consider the impact of policy on rural people. The Bill will enable a more robust approach by public authorities to consider the impact of changes in rural areas, based on evidence and making reasonable adjustments to those decisions where they are shown to have an adverse impact. If the amendments raised in this submission can't be included in the Bill at this stage then we would seek assurances that they can be added using the subordinate legislation which is included in clause 1 of the Bill

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

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