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Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion:
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research
Agency

9 December 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr William Irwin (Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr Robert Beatty Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
Dr Tracy Power Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I welcome Dr Tracy Power, director of analysis at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and Robert Beatty, head of the census branch. I ask you to take up to 10 minutes to give your briefing, and we will then ask questions.

Dr Tracy Power (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency): Thank you very much, Chair. I have been in NISRA for about five months, and part of my responsibility is the measures of deprivation. Robert is the head of the census branch and chaired the last couple of steering groups on the updates on the Noble indices. Hopefully, together, we can answer any questions that you have. I know that you have spoken to many people about the measurement of deprivation. Would you prefer that I clicked through the presentation, or are you happy if I just talk to the papers?

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): It is OK if you just talk to the papers.

Dr Power: I know that you have talked to many people, and we are happy to give evidence to your review. It is not often that statisticians get out to talk to people and users about the measures that they develop. We are very interested in what your review will show us, and we can maybe talk during questions about how you see it developing with the application and use of the multiple deprivation indices.

We have acknowledged upfront that there are rural issues. We have known that for quite some time through all the iterations of the measurements of deprivation. As you will have heard from many of your witnesses, because the super output areas, which cover about 2,000 people, cover large physical areas, it is difficult to find concentrations of deprivation in rural areas, whereas it is easier to find them in urban areas.

As you will see in your papers, NISRA has developed rural guidance for use in policy areas that deliberately want to target rural areas. You have it in your papers, and I am happy to answer any questions on it later. Generally, the multiple deprivation measure is a combination of all the domains, although it is not always necessarily the best measure to use. We recommend that policymakers, users and resource allocation experts look first at the domains rather than at the multiple deprivation measure (MDM) to see whether there are any domains that meet their policy needs. The proximity-to-services domain is the one that we say meets rural needs because it highlights the relative rankings of rural areas better than urban areas. There is no doubt that it is an issue, not just here but across all the UK.

I will give you a bit of background, and, hopefully, you can follow this as I go through my notes because I do not have a clicker to go through it on the screen. Rural issues were acknowledged in the Robson indices, which were developed in 1994. So, it is 20 years ago that we started all of this stuff, looking at indicators to measure deprivation. The Robson report acknowledged that the structure of urban and rural deprivation, when you compare them, is different. At that time, there was talk about census variables such as car ownership and whether that would be useful. It was felt that it would not be useful because it had a differential impact and said something different about rural and urban areas. That is to acknowledge that this is not a new issue; the collective analyst community has been struggling with it over the last 20 years.

I move on to the process of the deprivation measure development. In 2010, indices were managed by Robert's interdepartmental steering group, on which all Departments were represented: the Housing Executive; the Rural Development Council, which has been very helpful to us; the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA); the Equality Commission; and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). We recently updated the Noble indices, which is the first time that we have used this approach, similar to the rest of the UK. That is, effectively, the UK standard of methodology, and that is useful to us, not for comparing the results but because we now have a community of statisticians throughout the UK who we can talk to about their methodology and how things are changing over time.

One of the most important things about the process is that, even though the steering group had multi-agency representation, we did a wide consultation afterwards on the proposals that the steering group came up with and got people's ideas and input. We had three public meetings and a written consultation to which there were over 130 replies.

There are other ways of looking at deprivation, but, on the approach that NISRA takes, there are certain requirements that we need from the indicators that we use. Those are here, and I will not go through them individually. Basically, we need small-area, good-quality data that cover all of Northern Ireland and which are a major feature of deprivation. So, it needs to be something that everyone can intuitively understand as being related to deprivation. The problem that we have with measuring deprivation is that nobody actually knows what deprivation is; it is not as if we have a variable and can look at other variables and how they affect it. Deprivation is, by its very nature, difficult to measure and get a handle on. That is the essential problem.

So, we use indicators that are direct measures of deprivation. By that, I mean that you can intuitively understand that deprived people have these things happen to them. You can understand that a lack of employment is an effect of deprivation, as is low income, poor health and so on and all the other indicators. They are not linked statistically to deprivation in that they have a relationship; they are direct measures that people can intuitively understand. That is a very important dimension to get our heads round. They are also proper numbers. By that, I mean that you can see what the relationship is between the rankings from the least deprived to the most deprived. So, there are not strange things happening with the indicators that we use.

I will talk a little about geography, which is important if you have read the guidance on how to use these indices for rural areas. In the 2010 work, we used the super output areas as our main output and certainly works for the urban areas. We also have smaller output areas. There are 890 super output areas. I have given you a map with no data on it showing what Northern Ireland looks like at the super output area level. The next slide shows the output areas, which are much smaller in geographical area. There are more than 5,000 of them, and there are 350 people in the area. That can target smaller concentrations of deprived people than the super output area. Our guidance for rural areas is that if you want to use a multiple-deprivation measure, which is the combined measure of all the domains, we have supplied multiple deprivation measures at output area level. It comes back to what you have heard from other people during your review: the use of these measures is extremely important. The users need to understand what they are doing with them and what they

want to use them for before they start diving into the numbers. It is NISRA's opinion that if you want to use multiple deprivation measures, check out the output area level for rural areas, but it still recommends the proximity-to-services domain as the number-one go-to measure of deprivation in rural areas.

I apologise that my voice is a bit croaky, but, hopefully, I will get through this. I will move on to the components. You know all this stuff, but I will run through it again. The next slide shows the seven domains of deprivation and the weights. It is important to realise that the weights were agreed by the Executive, and they are based on a discussion around the steering group table, and a discussion with consultees, around what the most important deprivation indicators are for predicting and measuring deprivation. There is an element about the robustness of the data that make up each of those domains. That is what was discussed around the table, and those are the weights that were ratified by Ministers in 2005 and 2010. Can you follow this OK, or would you like me to do it on the screen?

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I think that everyone is OK.

Dr Power: I have given you the indices that make up the proximity-to-services domain, because that is one that will interest you most. We have given you the travel time to all those services, which you have probably seen before. Travel time to accident and emergency gets a double weighting, because the steering group felt that it was the most important element of service provision. There is a range of services in that slide. We feel that that is a good domain for rural proximity.

I have also given you maps of super output areas and output areas to illustrate my earlier point about it being important to look at the geography when considering what level of analysis you want to do. The slide on the output area shows that if you look at the top 10% of areas using the MDM output area you get rural wards. One thing commonly said is that the top 10%, which is known as a decile, does not give you any rural areas; it is a super output area level. That is absolutely correct. If you go to output area level, you find that you have homed down into smaller areas, and you pick up the rural deprivation.

The guidance note that you received highlights the top 10% rural areas that come out as deprived. You will know them better than I do: Crossmaglen, Gilford, Stewartstown, Dungiven, Pomeroy, Newtownstewart, Glenderg, Newtownhamilton, and so on, come out if you use the output area. It goes back to the point that users need to understand the complexities of the data and use the appropriate measure when they are trying to target, particularly when they are dealing with rural deprivation.

I move now to the future of the multiple deprivation measures and where we are taking them. It has been updated every five years so far; it was updated in 2005 and 2010. The position in the rest of the UK is that Wales has just published its updated deprivation measures. There is a bit of a difference between an update and a review. An update takes the methodology and indicators that are in place and puts the more recent data into them. A review is a more detailed look at whether those indicators are still the most relevant or whether we want to change the weightings or the methodology. So, there are options for what we might like to do. Wales simply did an update. England is consulting on an update and is planning to publish its indicators in 2015. Scotland will do something similar and will publish in 2016.

In Northern Ireland, we are waiting for OFMDFM and the statistics coordinating group, which is a cross-departmental group, to give us direction on the way forward and what it might like us to do. Now that I am in this area, I would be very excited about doing an update or a review because some very important issues have arisen — the new local government districts, for example — that make the 2010 indicators a little bit old now, not just for rural areas but more generally. We need to provide them with information about their small areas, which will be different from those in the 2010 publications. We have the 2011 census. Those populations have not been included in the multiple deprivation measures, and we would like to do that.

The main thing that has changed over the past four years has been NISRA's work on administrative data sources. We have come on leaps and bounds in our ability to analyse administrative data sources at small area level. We have been working very hard on planning for the next census and working on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project on administrative data. We feel that our admin data sources are improved, and there is extra information now through legal gateways being able to look at very small area level information. We could make major improvements to the quality of the analyses. We cannot forget that the steering group produced a paper containing

recommendations for the next review or update, some of which we feel we already have in the bag. There would be very little work to do such an update or review.

One of the major recommendations was that there should be a closer look at rural aspects, and your review would provide a very good platform to start that work. There are many recommendations that, even on first look, would affect the rural/urban dimension and the differentials between urban and rural areas. So, it is by no means a forgone conclusion that looking at all these would mean that the measurement of rural deprivation increases differentially compared to urban areas; however, it is something that we would like to take a look at. The slide shows you recommendations that could affect that dichotomy. I am happy to go into any of them if you wish to.

In summary, just as my throat is about to give up, I will say that there are issues and you have heard about them. We in NISRA think that we have given pretty good guidance on those issues to users and how the current measures can be best used, depending on whether the policy is spatial, what policy area it relates to, and that NISRA is there to give guidance. We are open to statisticians and policymakers in Departments to approach us to get guidance on how to use the measures in the way that is most appropriate to users' needs. Sorry about the clicker. I am happy to answer any questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Thank you very much for your presentation. Given the problems that we have with the measurement of rural deprivation, what further research does NISRA consider is needed to further identify rural deprivation?

Dr Power: Some of the big rural issues are the rate of benefit uptake, which is perceived as being lower in rural areas. We have no evidence to show us that in the Northern Ireland distribution of benefit uptake, so we would work with DSD, which is doing work on small area income estimates. That is one of the administrative databases that I referred to earlier that we did not have in 2010. Looking at such data would be a big issue to help identify whether the anecdotal evidence, which we have heard a lot of, is borne out by the data. That is one thing that we would do.

The recommendations paper spelled out a lot of the areas. Another aspect is further research into the effect of having the supply element of health services in urban areas. It was felt the last time that we needed to adjust for that if we were to look at it again. So, the recommendations paper sets out a lot of areas that we intend to look at and which would affect the differential. The slide points out many issues that would affect rural areas.

Mr Robert Beatty (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency): If I can just chip in. One of our strengths is our proximity-to-services domain, which is specifically aimed at rural deprivation. It is just proximity to services. Every time we consult on the work that we did in the three runs through of the multiple deprivation measures, everybody raises the issue. It is one thing to be five or 10 miles away from somewhere, but public transport and accessibility to services is equally important. We have been aware of that for a while, and, hopefully, Translink will have more information on that. That could extend it from a proximity to services to an actual access to services. That is another element that we could look at in future.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): You said that the benefits issue is DSD's remit.

Dr Power: DSD is doing a lot of interesting work through the legal gateways and through our work on administrative data, building a small area income estimate database, which looks at types of income and whether households are taking all the benefits that they are entitled to. Having that at Northern Ireland level would be a rich data source for the kinds of indicators that we look at to see what is happening in rural areas.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your briefing. I am aware of the three neighbourhood renewal areas in my constituency and of the great work that they do to support local communities. I was going to ask what more you feel could be done to identify deprivation in the wider rural context, but the Chair touched on that. When the 2005-2010 research was being conducted, how did you ensure that deprivation was identified as accurately in rural areas as it was in urban areas?

Mr Beatty: First, as Tracy said, all the indicators that go into the measures had to be sufficiently robust and had to be available across all of Northern Ireland; it was not just urban and rural but across the board. Some people put forward social capital as a variable of interest. It has potential, but in respect of the data sets and social capital, you end up with a little project in Lisburn and a little project

in Newry, and we do not have Northern Ireland-wide coverage. So, the indicators that go into it are equally applicable and equally robust across all of Northern Ireland.

With regard to ensuring that it covers all aspects of deprivation, if you go back to the domains, our starting point was that we have seven domains that we believe cover the types of deprivation that people in households would experience. We believe that it is fairly comprehensive; it has been through three sets of consultations. That is all I want to say initially.

Mrs Dobson: So, you are saying that you are satisfied that it was robust enough.

Mr Beatty: I do not want to say that we can always improve it; however, I think that it is fair to say that it is wide-ranging coverage and that all the indicators are sufficiently robust.

Mrs Dobson: Based on the seven domains.

Mr Beatty: Based on the seven domains with all the indicators that sit underneath them.

Mrs Dobson: When will you look at the next set of research? How will you take stock of the additional funding that has been undertaken in existing areas?

Dr Power: How will we take stock of?

Mrs Dobson: — of work that has already been carried out in existing areas. How will that be filtered into it?

Dr Power: Well, as I said earlier, we have not been commissioned yet to do an update or a review. However, these indicators are national statistics; I am sure that you are aware of that process. So, we are duty-bound to consult users; that is part of having national statistics status, and that is what we intend to do. We are doing that at the moment, and we will ask users in Departments whether they feel that we need to update. Say we get past all that, we will get another group together and start the work again. We will ask who around the table knows of anything that has been happening recently, using all the information that you referred to that was not, perhaps, available to us five years ago. That will be part of the work: to mine all the good, new applicable data to build what we hope would be even better measures. That is work that we would very much enjoy and want to do.

Mrs Dobson: However, there are no plans to —

Dr Power: We have not been commissioned to do it. It is not cheap; it is expensive and we need it to be supported financially. However, given the Budget situation, there is no surety that it will happen. A review could cost in the region of £250,000; that is the kind of money that would be needed to update the measures. That is the situation we are in. We are ready to talk about being commissioned and to do the work; we think that need to do it to keep up with the rest of the UK, but we have not started it.

Mrs Dobson: When you are compiling your statistics, is there a UK standard, or do regions apply different measures to identify deprivation? Would it be possible to be classed as deprived in one region of the UK but not in another, based on where you live?

Dr Power: The four countries of the UK use the same methodology. What I mean by that is that they build domains with indicators and they do analysis to build a multiple deprivation measure. However, because the data that we collect, the admin sources that we have and the policies that we have to collect admin data are all different, we do not use the same indicators. In fact, Northern Ireland is, in some areas, very much ahead in the small area data that we collect. For instance, one of the census questions that I would very much like to use was a new question in 2011 about the causes and reasons for disability. We have that small-area disability information now; England and Wales do not.

Mrs Dobson: Is it unique to Northern Ireland?

Dr Power: Scotland has it as well, but England and Wales do not. That, to me, seems to be a rich data source for finding out whether there is even a rural/urban dimension to disability.

Mrs Dobson: So, it is tailored to suit Northern Ireland?

Dr Power: Yes, but to answer your question, we cannot compare on a UK ranking, but we can say that we use a similar methodology to arrive at the multiple deprivation measures.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your interesting presentation. I am one of the opponents of the deprivation measures because I think that they do more harm than good. I am coming from the point of view of grant aid, etc. We still have the anomaly in some rural areas where one side of the street qualifies while the other does not. In this day and age, that should not be happening, but that is how it is in some areas of my constituency.

Emigration has not been hit on, and it should be looked at. I am glad to see the benefit take-up because of the proposed cuts to benefits, which will have a real effect. We need to move away from comparing urban with rural. We need to start comparing rural with rural and urban with urban, because comparing rural with urban is not comparing like with like. That creates problems of its own. There are a lot of other things there. You have that window of information on disability. Part of the problem with disability is that there is no central register here for disability. I think that is a problem with the Department. Not so long ago, the Department said that there was no need for it. I argue that there is, and I think you would agree. With the 11-council model, there is more of a centralisation of services; they are possibly moving out of the rural area into urban areas. That is going to cause a problem for one-car families, for instance. Where do they go? It is the whole thing. Rural poverty and social isolation are not mentioned, but they should be part of it. We finished the MARA project, and what is it showing up? That is worth using as information. I could go on all day.

Dr Power: There are a lot of interesting points there.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Have you asked your question yet?

Mr McMullan: No. *[Laughter.]* You keep doing this to me, but I will stop there.

Mr McAleer: I apologise for being late, but I had a meeting with the Hungarian ambassador, believe it or not. I have a couple of points, and I apologise if you have covered them. I and others speak a lot to rural organisations and individuals. There is a strong feeling that the measures that you have do not accurately reflect the level of poverty and deprivation in rural areas. Obviously, if we are targeting social need and using that as a measure, rural areas are not going to fare very well. One of the bugbears is that when you are weighting your MDM score, only 10% is awarded to proximity to services. The social output area that I live at the junction of is the number one most deprived in the whole of the North in terms of access to services, yet, because it is balanced at only 10%, it does not come up as being in the top 20% when it is fed into the overall thing. We know that the area is deprived; there is a lack of services and a lack of opportunities for people, but that is not reflected in those measures. What is your view on the weightings?

Dr Power: I apologise, because I do not know at what point you came in and what I had and had not said.

Mr McAleer: The point is that in the MDM score, there is a something like 25% for income and 25% for employment, but only 10% for proximity to services. That results in bringing rural areas right down the MDM.

Dr Power: There are a few points there. I have put up the output area map. The guidance for rural areas says that if you take the super output areas and look at the top 10%, you will see that no rural super output areas come out in the measure. You are correct about that. It goes back to the point about the intelligent use of the measures to figure out if we are looking at something about which it is reasonable to say there should be no rural areas in it. Sometimes, policymakers are; sometimes they are not, and they want to target rural areas. If they want to, there are other things that they can do. They can use the multiple deprivation measure output area. That shows that there are rural output areas that fall within the top decile. You can also use what are called quintiles, which are 20% rather than 10%. NISRA does not put out any guidance that says that you have to use deciles. You could use 20%; you could use 50%. There does not have to be that threshold. You can use whatever you think is reasonable.

You are right that proximity to services is weighted at 10%. In the presentation, I was at pains to point out that those weights were based on input from the steering group in respect of what was intuitive,

because people say that economic and employment deprivation are the big drivers. The weights were then agreed in the public consultation and by the Ministers. They have not changed over the past few years. Robert, is that right?

Mr Beatty: The weights have not changed. I would add to what Tracy said by quoting from the guidance we gave when we first put out the so-called Noble measures back in 2001. That was 13 years ago, and we are still saying it today. The seven domain scores — income, employment and so forth — are the key outputs of the research. One of NISRA's recommendations is that the domain scores should be used when they are appropriate targeting tools. Whatever the policyholder or Department, if they are working in a rural area and want to target rural deprivation, they are totally free to use proximity to services as the measure of deprivation should they so wish. They could also take it with employment.

The MDM is there if you are targeting deprivation in some wide sense, and its weights have been signed off by the Executive. However, it should only be used when you do not have a topic-specific target for your deprivation. If there is a programme on rural deprivation, it should be using the proximity to services domain and giving it a much higher weighting. Whoever is in charge of the programme is quite at liberty to give it a much higher weighting than the 10% that is given in the MDM.

Mr McAleer: To follow on from that, obviously income is weighted at 25%, which is fair enough. However, that does not take account of the fact it costs more to live in a rural area. I think that a church in Scotland did a lot of work on that and reckoned that it is about 20% more costly.

Just last week, a close relative of mine moved from the city back to Tyrone, where we are from. Instantly, they have had to buy a second car and will probably have to add £100 a week of diesel to travel to the city to their work. So their disposable income had automatically been wiped out, because they are now living in a rural area. These measures might look at income, and that is grand. However, they do not take account of the fact that the expenditure is much higher if you live in a rural area.

Mr Beatty: I suppose that I have two responses to that. First, the proximity to services domain is, in a sense, a measure of that. One of the costs is that you have to go further to get to the services. With regard to the general point about prices being higher in rural areas, that is the sort of thing that we are more than happy to look at in a review. I go back to the point that I made earlier that anything that goes into the measures has to be robust and available across all of Northern Ireland. If there is robust information on price differentials, that is entirely the sort of thing that we would build into a statutory review.

Mr McAleer: It is not even the prices. It is the fact that you have to buy a second car and you have to travel up and down the road 10 times to access services. That wipes out your disposable income. The use of income as some sort of measure of poverty or deprivation then becomes inaccurate. It does not mean the same in a rural area as an urban area, where all the services are on your doorstep.

Mr Beatty: I can only concede that you are making very good points. If we had some hard data that we could use to quantify that and put it in — it would go into the measures if that data was available. We would be more than happy to look at it in any review that is coming up.

Mr McAleer: Sorry for dragging out the point, but I think that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has done quite a bit of work on that in Scotland. Perhaps it would be an idea to lift some of that work, test it and maybe apply it to your measures here.

Mr Beatty: I am more than happy to look at that sort of information.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): OK. Are there any other questions?

Mr McMullan: When we look at Scotland and England as examples, we have to bear in mind that Scotland, England and Wales have different systems of government. The local authorities there fund a lot of things that are not funded here, such as care for the elderly, health and all of that. We are out on a limb. Declan has talked about disposable income, transport and all of that. We do not have the things that Scotland have. Therefore, to use it as a measure in a lot of the cases that we deal with here would be inaccurate. We need to look at this on its own.

Dr Power: Northern Ireland has a stand-alone measure, and the rankings, from one right up, are for the areas in Northern Ireland alone.

Mr McMullan: Urban areas are ranked better than the area where I live, which is a totally inaccurate picture of a rural area. If an urban area ranks higher for deprivation than a rural area, there has to be something wrong with the way that it is calculated.

Dr Power: I am not familiar with the particular areas.

Mr McMullan: I am from the glens area, and the only area there that is highly ranked is Glendun. An urban area ranks higher than that, which is totally inaccurate. As I said, we are still making the comparison between urban and rural. We need to compare urban with urban and rural with rural. If we do that, I think that we would get a different picture on a lot of things.

Mr Beatty: Again, I go back to the point that Tracy made that it is all about the use of the measures. We produce them for all of Northern Ireland because people want to compare across all of Northern Ireland. As I said earlier, if you have a rural policy, there is nothing to stop a rural policy directorate taking the access-to-services domain and giving it a much higher weighting. I imagine that the glens of Antrim come out quite highly on the access-to-services domain.

Mr McMullan: As you quite rightly say, there is a lot of information that we do not have here that we should have. There is no central register for disability. That makes the job harder, and we are not getting a true reflection of it.

Dr Power: That is why the census question will be very helpful to us. It does have small-area-level disability information.

Mr Anderson: Thank you for your presentation. Apologies for arriving late. The take-up of benefits is an issue that has been looked at for a number of years now by DSD and others. What evidence do we have that there is a lot of benefit out there? Do we know that the rural people who are entitled to this are not picking up on that? Also, what assistance is being given by the likes of DSD and others to touch base with those people and to reach out to them?

Dr Power: I am a DFP statistician, so I cannot answer about DSD policy, but I can say —

Mr Anderson: Do you have any information coming back from DSD?

Dr Power: DSD statisticians are now building a database that will allow them to find out where there are high levels of non-uptake of benefits. They are in the process of doing that, so the data have not been analysed. They are going through the technical building of the database. They are working with us, and we are working with them, and we are keeping in close contact. Once they have that data, they will use it for their policy needs to be able to target individuals who are not taking the benefits that they need. Obviously, they will have some policy to answer your second question. The data will enable us to analyse that small area where there may be non-uptake of benefit higher, relatively, than in other areas. The anecdotal evidence is that there might be an urban/rural dimension to that. In that case, we would build it into any future measure of deprivation.

Mr Anderson: Obviously, there is a large amount of work in this.

Dr Power: Oh my goodness! It costs £250,000.

Mr Anderson: To get this up and running and to get those statistics will take some time.

Dr Power: Yes. I am delighted that you recognise that it is hard work.

Mr Anderson: I do recognise that. I have touched on that on other areas in relation to this. I think that we have to do everything that we can and make efforts to ensure that we get down into those areas and those issues to make sure that we touch base with those people. It is quite obvious that there is a lot of benefit that is not being taken up. Maybe the facts and figures will not go that way in future. Robert, did you mention Translink?

Mr Beatty: Yes, I mentioned transport in rural areas.

Mr Anderson: Rural transport and Translink is practically non-existent in some areas. That is an issue of access to services. How do we get that up and running and moving?

Mr Beatty: All I can say is that, in the previous reviews, as I said earlier, we have this proximity to services, which we think is a good measure. It could be improved greatly if we could overlay it with the ability to access the services, which involves the availability and the frequency of public transport, buses and so forth. That was raised previously. At the last review, Translink told us that, as ever, it was working on things. If and when this new review comes up, we will certainly go and talk to Translink to see what information it has now on the location and frequency of all of its services across Northern Ireland. Hopefully, that will feed into and improve the proximity-to-services measure.

Mr Anderson: Do you think that access to services will prove to be one of the bigger issues?

Mr Beatty: It stands to reason that if you live in a city you can hop on a bus near an A&E hospital, whereas if you are 20 miles away you have to have a car or get a bus or a taxi. Clearly, there is an element of — put whatever word you want on it — disadvantage to the person who is 20 miles away. It is about attempting to quantify that and build it into the measures; that is what we are trying to do.

Mr Anderson: We have already touched on buying second cars to travel to work and things like that, but it is not just about travelling to work. It is about elderly people and suchlike who maybe live in isolated rural areas and have to get to hospital appointments or whatever. It is an issue that will throw up some interesting results. I wish you well.

Mr McAleer: The fact that we do not have a rural area in the top decile says it all. We know that rural areas are deprived. I know you said that organisations can pick and choose measures, but the reality is that when you do these statistics and put them out there, they are going to use the MDM rank score. If you are going to put it out there, it needs to be right. Realistically, under targeting social need, the money is going to follow. This is going to be used as an indicator in terms of its MDM. This has to be got right, and I think that a review is very important.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): OK. Departments can use proximity to services to target resources. Do you know of any Departments that are doing this?

Dr Power: Well, we do the measures, and we have statisticians in Departments who advise on methodologies. Centrally, since I have been here, I have not done that work, but I intend to kick it off at a meeting next Monday. I want the Departments to tell us how they are using the indices, and we will have that information. As I said earlier, it is part of the user engagement side of having it being a national statistic. It just so happens that the meeting is next Monday. They will then feed back to us centrally how they are actually using the measures to target their policies.

I looked up the rural development fund, though, because I know that you have been talking about it. It currently uses the employment domain as well as the multiple deprivation decile. There is obviously some different thinking going on out there rather than just using the multiple deprivation decile figures all the time. That is there; it is published and, as you say, some people are just picking that up and going with it, but there are so many other ways of using the measures. I reiterate that NISRA is there to support people if they want to discuss what might best suit their policy needs.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): There are no further questions. Thank you very much for your presentation.