



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Poverty and Social Inclusion:
Rural Community Network

4 November 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Aidan Campbell	Rural Community Network
Ms Kate Clifford	Rural Community Network

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I welcome Kate Clifford, director of the Rural Community Network (RCN), and Mr Aidan Campbell, policy and public affairs officer at the Rural Community Network. You can have up to 10 minutes for your presentation, and that will be followed by questions.

Ms Kate Clifford (Rural Community Network): Thank you very much for the invitation. It is important for us to be here to present some of the findings of the work that we have done and some of our opinions on the work that has been ongoing with DARD on the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) initiative. You have a briefing in the pack, so I will not go through the background.

The Rural Community Network has been in existence for 21 years. Our core business is tackling poverty, rural deprivation and disadvantage. We welcome the fact that DARD is running the TRPSI programme as it puts a focus on issues of rural poverty and social isolation, which, as I said, are core to the business of RCN. The programme has rolled out innovative projects delivered in partnership with rural stakeholders on tackling poverty and social isolation and has sought innovative and creative ways of addressing issues in rural areas. It has also supported community development infrastructure in rural areas. That has built upon the investment that DARD has made in rural community development over the past 20-odd years. RCN believes that the challenge remains that other Departments are not taking rural poverty and social isolation into account to the degree that they should in their service delivery. There is an opportunity to support other Departments in their rural delivery through the rural White Paper action plan and rural-proofing agenda. TRPSI provides practical examples of what can be achieved when programmes are flexible and delivered in partnership.

As we know, the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) initiative has released previously unclaimed money that benefits the wider economy of Northern Ireland and, specifically, the rural economy. Community development funding and the rural challenge fund have secured resources to support and advise individuals and communities. They have supported and sustained communities through community development, and they have helped those who need services to access the right support in the right ways. The assisted rural transport scheme and the contacting elderly rural isolation project have reduced isolation and kept people well in their homes. The joined-up nature of that work across Departments and sectors has been very positive.

A better understanding of the extent and dynamics of rural poverty and rural deprivation is needed if they are to be tackled. Deprived rural households are often scattered throughout relatively affluent rural areas. Therefore it is harder to identify using the multiple deprivation measure. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) needs to reconsider how rural deprivation can be better captured in the multiple deprivation measures. We will come back to that at the end of the presentation.

We want to talk about the successes and otherwise of TRPSI. You will be aware of the detail, as you have the brief. We believe that the Department should consider how it can best use the data that TRPSI has generated. MARA has visited 14,000 households across rural Northern Ireland. That is a massive data source and could provide valuable insights into rural poverty and deprivation. We believe that it could also be used to inform another round of TRPSI, lifetime opportunities or another government programme. Rural areas require a flexible approach to service delivery, with a focus on outreach and partnership with grassroots organisations. TRPSI has demonstrated that that approach can work and can deliver concrete results. Other Departments need to learn from that approach so that their services can be delivered in a way that better meets the needs of rural households. It is that partnership approach in delivering TRPSI that has been a welcome feature. DARD has been very open to developing new partnerships and new approaches. A wide range of partner organisations has been involved in TRPSI, and DARD has been particularly good at utilising the expertise and knowledge of rural stakeholder organisations.

We believe that it has been more challenging to build relationships across Departments. Although the TRPSI initiative is welcome, there is a risk that other Departments will see rural poverty and social isolation solely as a DARD responsibility. The learning from the TRPSI programme has huge implications for the work of other Departments, but there is a strong argument that they are not making the most of that potential learning.

As an organisation, we know that low pay is an issue in rural communities, and, coupled with rising living costs, it has led to even tighter household incomes. Is there anything that a further TRPSI initiative could do to address this issue, beyond maximising the uptake of tax credits through a MARA-type scheme? The impact of welfare reform on rural communities is completely unknown at this stage — until the legislation is agreed and implemented — but it could mean that households that are already targeted by MARA could benefit from a follow-up visit.

Public spending will be even tighter in the next Budget period, so any successor to TRPSI will have to be very well targeted to stand any chance of gaining Executive approval. Clearly, any future TRPSI programme and initiatives under the rural development programme priority 6 should complement, but not duplicate, one another. We believe that if MARA runs for a third time, it may be harder to identify participants. At this stage, many low-income households in the most deprived rural communities have received an enabler visit in the past three years. If the programme moves to the next most disadvantaged rural areas to target poor households in those areas they may become harder to identify. There is no easy solution to this problem, but it may require greater effort to target those households.

I will hand over to Aidan, who will talk to you about the multiple deprivation measures.

Mr Aidan Campbell (Rural Community Network): Thanks, members, and apologies for coughing; I have a sore throat.

Mr McCarthy: Do not be spreading any diseases.

Mr A Campbell: Hopefully, I will not smite anyone.

We explored, in depth, the measurement and usage of rural deprivation, which are in the terms of reference for the inquiry, at a Carnegie challenge debate in this Building in November 2013. That event was sponsored by some of the MLAs on the Committee and by some of its former members.

Unlike urban areas, which are socially segregated, deprivation in rural areas exists among relative affluence. That presents a challenge for policymakers, as area-based interventions that can work well in urban areas where deprivation is spatially concentrated will not necessarily work as well in a rural area where poor people live alongside people who are relatively affluent. There is evidence of that.

The DSD family resources survey urban/rural report of 2011-12 identified that, in 2011, 24% of individuals living in rural areas were considered to be in relative poverty before housing costs. Individuals living in a household with a net disposable income below 60% of the UK median income are considered to be in relative poverty. Roughly 155,500 people are considered to be in relative poverty in rural Northern Ireland.

By contrast, no rural wards fall within the top 10% of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, as defined by the multiple deprivation measure. Even if you examine it at the smaller geography of census output area level, which NISRA recommends for rural deprivation, you will see that only 15 rural output areas fall within the top 10% of the most deprived. The output areas have a population of about 1,000 to 1,500 people, so there is a big mismatch in those two data sets.

I will outline the options. To address the issue you can change how Departments use the multiple deprivation measure and ensure that they think more carefully about how they target deprived rural households. In fairness, MARA has done that by using the multiple deprivation measure, first, to target the most deprived rural wards, and, secondly, to augment that with local knowledge from grassroots community organisations to target individual households. Another option is to change how the multiple deprivation measures capture rural deprivation.

This is not an exclusively Northern Ireland issue; rural stakeholder groups in England, Scotland and Wales have raised it in their jurisdictions. Analysis of the index of multiple deprivation in England by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), a sister organisation of ours, identified that only 2% of the most deprived areas are rural but that 18% of those living below the poverty line live in rural areas. We included a few links to work in ACRE's website. It has also been an issue in Wales, and the Welsh Local Government Association's rural forum has presented a report on that. There are links to it, if members want to follow up on it.

At our Carnegie challenge debate last year, Trutz Haase spoke about the methodology that his team had developed to measure area-based deprivation in the Republic of Ireland, which we believe takes better account of rural deprivation. Their method recognises that the experience of deprivation in rural communities is profoundly influenced by location and by the opportunities that people can or cannot access due to their location and mobility. They define that as opportunity deprivation, and their model includes indicators that quantify the demographic decline that opportunity deprivation leads to. The indicators that they use are the proportion of the dependent population, those over 65 and under 16, in any ward, and the percentage of the adult population in those wards with low educational attainment. Those are used as proxies for rural deprivation in their model. We believe that NISRA should consider how those issues can be addressed in the multiple deprivation measure.

NISRA is due to conduct a review of the measure in the next few years. When NISRA refreshed the multiple deprivation measure in 2010, it produced a report with recommendations for future research, one of which was that further research should be undertaken into identifying rural deprivation, specifically the suitability of indicators employed and the geographical areas used. The ARD Committee could scrutinise how NISRA plans to action that recommendation so that any changes to the measure can ensure that rural deprivation is captured.

RCN also recommends that NISRA reissue guidance to policymakers on the use of the multiple deprivation measure for the allocation of resources and on its limitations in identifying deprived households in rural areas. We believe that a better evidence base will inform DARD and other Departments and should lead to more effective policy interventions. A better understanding of the dynamics of rural poverty and deprivation should be of interest to all Departments and should inform rural proofing.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Thank you very much for your presentation. Page 2 of your written briefing refers to the data that TRPSI has generated, particularly via the MARA project. You mention

that the opportunity to use the data appears not to have been used. Can you expand on that? What should be done with the data? What use could it be?

Mr A Campbell: It is perhaps not that the data has not been used, but it exists and we think that it has great potential in identifying where poverty and deprivation are located in rural communities and what the issues are with fuel poverty and benefit uptake. It could show where people have received a MARA visit and then did not make contact with the advice agencies in those areas. So, it could perhaps start to pinpoint where there are issues of pride and where there are people in rural communities who feel that they are self-reliant and do not want to come forward to claim their entitlements. We could start to identify groups of people, demographics, age groups and communities where that reluctance exists. That could be a useful indicator of where future efforts could be made.

It is a good resource, and it could become a great resource. It sits in the Public Health Agency. The final evaluation has not been completed, so we do not know, but I imagine that, in that data, there should be some really useful indicators about the dynamics behind rural deprivation and, potentially, indicators about what we should do in any successor programmes.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I see that there were 14,000 household visits.

Mr A Campbell: It is a massive sample.

Ms Clifford: It is a massive sample.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): The information that you provided on the success of the MARA project is also interesting. You note that, for every one pound invested in the first phase, there were over £8 of social returns. That is the first time that I have heard that figure. How did you come to that conclusion? Will you give us more details on that?

Mr A Campbell: It came from the first evaluation, although I am not sure which company carried it out. It might have been Deloitte, but it was a consultancy company. I can send the link to the Committee. Perhaps we should have included it as a reference in the briefing.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your briefing. I have a couple of points. What more should the Department do to reach out to those who are experiencing real rural poverty? I know that many of them often fail to come up on the radar on various projects. Kate, you spoke about that during the presentation and about people who are hard to identify. You both raised concerns about multiple deprivation measures and their limitations in identifying deprived households. Have you made those concerns known to NISRA?

I also note that you spoke about Departments getting a better understanding of the dynamics of rural poverty. Surely it is worrying that, despite all the statistics, they do not seem to have got a grip on it. What improvements would you like to see in the data?

Ms Clifford: To answer your second question first, there is a real need for the rural-proofing agenda to be pushed very hard. There is a need for Departments to understand that there needs to be more flexibility in the way that programmes are rolled out and delivered. We have seen some good examples of that. The Western Trust in particular has done phenomenal work in that respect. It identified a lack of outreach services in its area, and it allowed things such as ambulatory clinics to take place and has linked up with local transport providers to support people to get to hospital and hospital appointments. We worked on a project with older people to enable that to happen.

There are examples of good practice. It is about encouraging Departments to see that flexibility and partnership are ways in which rural disadvantage can be addressed. Services should not be delivered through a one-size-fits-all approach. What will work in an urban environment will not work in a rural one.

Will you repeat your first question?

Mrs Dobson: My first question was about those who disappear below the radar, who we are not reaching out to and are not getting to know about. Kate, I think that you said that people are reticent to come forward. How do you reach those in the greatest need?

Ms Clifford: The MARA project in particular has done that by using local enablers and local resources. It has been targeted at disadvantage and disadvantaged areas and that has been augmented by local knowledge, local information and a joined-up service approach. So, when an occupational therapist goes out to someone who has had a fall and realises that that person is in difficulty they would connect them with a local food programme or a support service.

There is a wealth of information that could be gleaned from the MARA results to look at why there is a low uptake of benefit, why people are not coming forward and why they do not understand what support is available to them in their local constituencies. I think that there is a joined-up approach. There are lessons to be learned from what has happened and what has been rolled out that could be brought to other Departments to support what they are doing.

We know that there is underemployment and intermittent employment in rural areas. It is more likely that people who are unemployed for six weeks are not going to make their way into town to sign on. They know that there is employment round the corner, so they will work without a benefit for six or eight weeks. We know that there is a low uptake of free school meals in some areas because people have intermittent low-paid or seasonal employment. That all impacts on benefit uptake in rural areas. We need to work through MARA to find out what those barriers are. Ad campaigns such as the one that has been happening for older people about checking their benefits could work in rural areas and support people to understand what they are entitled to, how they make a claim and how they make those entitlements.

Mr A Campbell: Another practical example is that, anecdotally, we think that people in rural communities who own assets and who are relatively resource-poor but asset-rich, who have small farms but have low incomes, often see that asset as a bar to any benefit entitlement. It is not necessarily a bar to all benefit entitlement, but for some of them it might be. There may be an opportunity to work with farmers' organisations such as the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA) and even agents and agricultural consultants who support farmers in filling in single farm payments. There could be some thinking around how they could get the message out to people who have those assets but who may have other entitlements that could boost the low income while keeping them involved in agriculture part-time. That is another practical example that any future programme could consider.

Mrs Dobson: You are quite right. I am particularly concerned about older people. I noted that you talked about rolling out your innovative projects. We know, and you mentioned it, Aidan, that tackling rural poverty and isolation is not unique to Northern Ireland. You spoke about England and Wales and their examples as well. As you said, Kate, often the issues are cross-cutting between Departments. I know elderly people who have gained quite a lot from going to evening classes and further education colleges. Given that that will be squeezed under the current budget, do you think that there is an opening for greater cooperation between DARD and the colleges to maintain that? Many see that as a rural lifeline. They go to computer or other classes in the evening, which may be the only interaction that elderly people in particular get with others. It is an important lifeline for them. Would you like to see greater cooperation between Departments to maintain that with the current budget being squeezed as well? It is so important for them to avail of that service.

Ms Clifford: One of the things that we have seen over the past 20 years in rural development is that rural communities have become very resilient, and they look to join up services. So, you have a community education college providing education to young people who are not in employment or training but also supplying courses to elderly people.

Mrs Dobson: Computer courses?

Ms Clifford: We have seen the growth of the University of the Third Age in many areas. The big thing for us is the connectivity of services. I recently did a piece of work for DEL.. I was in Fermanagh, and the centre that people went to in order to access education to reskill them also provided debt advice and advice on what volunteering opportunities were available locally. It provided advice on free services in the community that people could avail themselves of and recreation that connected into programmes for young people and managing teenagers. So, people were not just getting a service around —

Mrs Dobson: It is all-encompassing.

Ms Clifford: — getting back into education or getting back into employment; they were also getting an holistic connectivity into the community and voluntary sector in that area. That is where, under the squeeze in budgets, we are at risk of losing the community development infrastructure that is built over time and those connections right across as resources and services get squeezed and connections get lost.

Mrs Dobson: Have you engaged with FE colleges to find out about the effectiveness of the courses? I know from constituents who have contacted me that they have gained immensely from those courses. As I said, they are all-encompassing. Some of them are doing computer classes that they never would have thought of before, and that is enabling them to go out and engage, and their basic skills are being maintained. Have you engaged with FE colleges?

Ms Clifford: No.

Mrs Dobson: That might be something that you could do, since they are under pressure and are being squeezed to see what more can be done cross-departmentally with DARD.

Ms Clifford: We have pushed the lifelong learning agenda very hard, and we have a skills and education officer in our organisation. In many of the organisations that we work with, we broker in education and training services specifically around community development, computer skills and access to basic skills for people, but we have not connected with FE colleges.

Mr A Campbell: I completely accept your point. My mother who is 80 goes to local classes, and I know that it is about contact, getting out of the house, getting on the bus a couple of mornings a week and getting up to the local town for social interaction. My mother is 80, so, obviously, there is not an employability aspect, but those leisure courses can be very important for older people. As you rightly say, we know that DEL will have to face a big budget cut, and it is focused on the employability agenda.

Mrs Dobson: That leads into the rural isolation with the Department.

Mr A Campbell: Absolutely. There is a cost to that. If we can keep those older people who are on low incomes in their homes and well for longer, potentially we can say that that is offsetting health spending in the long term. That is a difficult argument to make when Departments have to cut budgets.

Mrs Dobson: Particularly around rural isolation, I think that it is very important that that is maintained. Thank you very much.

Mr Byrne: Thanks for the presentation. I congratulate the Rural Community Network on 20 years of service to rural communities. In relation to cooperation between Departments, how can that be achieved in order to address rural-proofing issues and, in particular, tackling rural poverty?

Ms Clifford: We believe that it is the remit of every Department to understand rural issues and to understand why there is a differential for rural services. We have looked at partners in England, Scotland and Wales, and we have looked at how Departments are beginning to take account of the rural differential. For us, it is about saying to Departments that rural proofing is not a tick-box exercise and saying, "How can you deliver good services with good quality and best value in rural areas that meet the needs of rural dwellers?" That is the bottom line for us. That is what we would like to see. With the rural-proofing agenda and the rural White Paper action plan, which was developed a number of years ago, we have been very strong in lobbying Departments to say that it is not one size fits all. We need to take account of the rural differential.

I always go back to the example of the health visitor whom I worked with a long time ago in Draperstown. She said that when she was a health visitor in Belfast, she could do eight visits in a day to young mums, but when she was in Draperstown, she would have been lucky to get three visits done in a day because of the distance that she had to cover. Her target was exactly the same had she been based in Belfast where her clients or the groups that she had to visit were in a very small geographical area. In winter, it would have been very difficult for her to cover that area or that number of visits. So, there is a differential. There is what we call the rural premium — the cost of delivering services in rural areas. It will not be the same as delivering in urban areas.

Mr Byrne: Who should take the formal lead and coordinate between Departments?

Ms Clifford: It is the responsibility of all Departments to take the lead; that is not a get-out clause. DARD has done fantastic joined-up work. It has a responsibility to ensure that rural does not lose out; however, every Department has a responsibility to police its money and its priority for rural as well as for urban people.

Mr Byrne: Secondly, should or will the newly formed councils have any role in trying to tackle rural poverty?

Ms Clifford: Absolutely. Any council that has a rural jurisdiction will have to develop a policy on tackling poverty and isolation in rural areas.

Mr A Campbell: If I can jump in here, people in rural areas will expect their councils to take whatever actions. We know that councils have limited powers, and councils in England or Scotland have more limited powers, but I am sure that local rural stakeholder groups will ask councils to consider how they can make an impact on rural poverty, how they can spend their money differently, and how they pay and recruit staff. All those issues need to be considered to make sure that they can have an impact in their area. It is also about how the benefits of the economic development that they promote in their areas get down to the more deprived rural communities.

There is a great interest in rural areas, certainly in the Mid-Ulster council area. A community planning process has just started, and there are community engagement events; the first was in Dungannon about three weeks ago. A venue was booked for 50 people, and I think that 120 turned up. It was the same in Cookstown, and Kate was at that meeting. In those areas, there is significant interest from rural community and community groups generally in local government, their new powers and community planning in particular.

You could argue that people's expectations have been raised and that their expectations of community planning may be too high. It cannot solve all problems, and councils will have limited budgets. However, there is a definite interest in it, and, from our conversations with councils and councillors, we know that they are interested in playing their part in tackling rural poverty and isolation. They know that it is an issue. The council areas have expanded and have taken in large rural hinterlands, and they are conscious of ensuring that those areas do not lose contact with the services that councils provide.

Ms Clifford: I do not think that it is a matter of deflecting resources into rural communities, but about ensuring that a fair share of resources go into rural communities. We should follow where need and deprivation exist. That should be the priority. Whether the need and deprivation are in urban areas or rural areas, both should have a fair share of resources and a fair crack of the whip. As we outlined in our briefing, the difficulty for us is that we just do not think that rural disadvantage and deprivation are being highlighted enough in statistics, which are a kind of a blunt instrument that is being used by NISRA. We think that there needs to be a more refined look at how the indicators could encourage the better identification of rural deprivation by NISRA.

Mr McMullan: I apologise for not being here for the start of your presentation. I always find what you are talking about very interesting.

MARA is one of the most successful projects. It has not yet been seen how important it is, but it will be in the future. The secret of the MARA project is gleaning of information that can be put to practical use. We have not yet seen any practical outworkings of how we will do that, but everybody should put their heads together and use that information.

You are quite right that community groups have bought into the new councils. However, the new councils will have a job on their hands working with urban and rural areas, because three or four of the new councils have brought different councils together. How they work the rural development programme will be a good one. That will be the trick, because the urban money has been withdrawn by the Minister. Therefore, the only money out there is in the rural development programme, and there could be conflict in councils if they put resources into the rural development programme for rural dwellers, and urban dwellers do not get them.

I am not the biggest fan of the Noble indices for deprivation. I have said time and again, even in my 20 years on council, that they should be done away with, as they work against rural dwellers in many

cases instead of working for them. The problem is that there are higher deprivation levels in urban areas than in rural areas. It does not square up at all. That all has to be looked at.

We have a great opportunity of laying down a marker for the way forward, and I honestly believe that the marker is the MARA project and the information that it has brought in the record, last year, the office that I keep in East Antrim helped to bring in £238,000 of unclaimed benefits for people — a sign of a massive hole in the system. You know where I am coming from. So, well done. You deserve support, but I hope that we can find a way of taking information out of the MARA project and putting it to practical use.

Mr McAleer: Sorry for missing the beginning of your presentation. I want to pick up on what Oliver said. Kate, you described the methodology for measuring deprivation as a blunt instrument. How, in your opinion, is the fact that it does not accurately capture deprivation impacting in rural areas?

Ms Clifford: One issue is that vulnerable people exist in rural areas but do not necessarily live in deprived areas. So, how do you get to vulnerable people in a relatively affluent area? We know that there are people in deprivation living in Bangor and in other more affluent communities. We did work with NISRA and had the Carnegie debate. Trutz Haase talks about putting 12 or 18 legs on a stool instead of three or four. So, it is about getting the right indicators to measure the right levels of deprivation. Aidan is better equipped to talk on this than I am.

Mr A Campbell: Declan, you asked about the effects, or the outworking, of the current measure. I suspect that, if a policymaker in a Department is writing a policy and knows that it is supposed to target deprivation, the gold standard or go-to set of indicators is the multiple deprivation measure. I am not a statistician. I do not understand all the ins and outs of how the multiple deprivation measure is constructed — neither, I am sure, do most policymakers in Departments. However, when a Minister tells you to design and construct a policy to target deprivation, the multiple deprivation measure is naturally what you go to. Then, when you look at the 10% most deprived rural wards in that, you see that none are rural. So, if you are designing a programme base that is trying to tackle deprivation, it will miss out rural households that do not fit within that multiple deprivation category.

An outworking of that was the social investment fund programme, which targets the 10% most deprived, the criterion being the 10% most deprived rural wards. At the time, we raised the issue of rural deprivation with OFMDFM. In fairness, it came back and said that, if any community could make a specific case for their area using other evidence, it would look at it. The social investment fund, which used that 10% measure, was about tackling deprivation and poverty and, to an extent, tackling the legacy of the Troubles. It will be interesting to see whether any rural projects are funded through the social investment fund. I suspect not because it will be very difficult for a rural community to produce objective evidence of deprivation if their area is not high in the multiple deprivation measure. That is a practical example of the outworking, Declan. I do not know whether that is the answer that you were after.

Mr McAleer: I have a wee supplementary. I attended the Carnegie event in the Long Gallery around a year ago and heard from NISRA and Trutz Haase. How would you fix it? Are there other models or examples of a better methodology?

Ms Clifford: We have looked at Wales, and ACRE in England is a sister organisation. ACRE stands for Action with Communities in Rural England. Wales and Scotland have looked at it as well. It is about refining the indicators. That is a statistical measure, and we are not statisticians. Aidan will give the example of the three key indicators, and there is a rural one on access to services.

Mr A Campbell: The multiple deprivation measure has a range of indicators. Within seven domains, there are something like 52 indicators. Income and employment are the two most important domains and constitute 50% of the overall weight of the multiple deprivation measure. However, another domain is access to services, and, if you look at the wards that are deprived under that domain, you will see that they are predominantly rural. I think that the top one is Rosslea or Brookeborough —

Mr McAleer: Owenkillew.

Mr A Campbell: Sorry, Owenkillew in your constituency is up there as well. There is a high correlation between the wards that are income, education and employment deprived, and they are predominately urban. The same wards show up at the top of all those domains, but they do not show

up in the access to services domain — all wards there are rural. When we were having our Carnegie Challenge debate, Trutz Haase's view was that that was because the model that NISRA is using is not conceptually right. I cannot really make a value judgement on that. You were there that day, Declan, and his argument seemed convincing. It is about how to construct a measure that takes account of people being located far from jobs, services or educational opportunities and their ability to access them. If you live in west Tyrone or Fermanagh, are relatively well off and have access to a car, you can access those opportunities. You can commute for employment and education. If, for example, you have a disability and there is no public transport, or you cannot access community transport, your life chances and your ability to access opportunities are severely constrained. The model that they use looks at the idea of opportunity deprivation. I think that it is an interesting concept, and I understand that Trutz is coming to present to the Committee.

Ms Clifford: From our perspective, the multiple deprivation measures work for urban deprivation. It is not that we are saying that they do not work; we are saying that we need a different tool and a different set of measures for rural. We looked at what our partners in Wales, Scotland and England are doing, and they say that it needs to be refined — a sifting down to a finer grain of working with the statistics available in order to be more rurally sensitive. That is a key point for us. It is about having a rurally sensitive index. However, we also urge caution in how it is applied: when that rurally sensitive index is used, it must be used correctly. Just as the multiple deprivation measures do not work for rural, a new rural index will not work for all areas; it will work for rural areas.

Mr A Campbell: The other complication is that the multiple deprivation model here is similar to the model in England, Scotland and Wales, so there are obvious comparability issues, even for block grant purposes and measuring deprivation across the UK. That needs to be considered when you are considering how to refine the measure for rural deprivation.

Mr Anderson: I apologise for arriving late and missing your presentation. Aidan, you mentioned that meetings were held in Dungannon and Cookstown. You thought that maybe 50 people would turn up and were surprised when 100-plus turned up. Does that not send out a message that something is wrong in the rural areas and that people there are missing out on something?

Ms Clifford: There is huge interest in community planning and massive anticipation of it coming in. I think that the message is not that there is something wrong; people are just so keen to be consulted on what community planning will look like, and they are hungry for information on how it will roll out. I sat at a rural development table at which four or five sports clubs were represented. They were keen to have their issues put on the agenda and for people to know about and understand the broader context of the work that do, not just the sport services that they provide. They were also keen for the new council to understand that they had a role to play in the development of their community. Maybe I should clarify that it was not only rural groups that came to the meetings. They were held in the Mid Ulster constituency, and between eight and 12 consultations will be run over the next couple of months by the new council, which covers Cookstown, Magherafelt and Dungannon. A number of those groups have been in contact with and supported by their local council over the past number of years. They are unsure about how community planning will roll out, so they are very keen to be at the table, but nobody is clear about what their role will be at that table. At the Burnavon, for example, about 80 people were supposed to turn up, but there were over 120, which meant that there was a queue.

Mr Anderson: It is good to get that engagement.

Ms Clifford: It is phenomenal.

Mr A Campbell: I see it as a positive that there is good engagement and good interest.

Mr Anderson: Kate, you said that you would like a fair share of resources. I am a rural dweller. In the past, did rural dwellers not get the same resources as were sent, for various reasons, into the urban areas? In certain areas, were those in the rural community, more or less, the forgotten people at times?

Ms Clifford: Absolutely. I am a community development advocate, probably a community development junkie. It is the case in very many areas that, if the community had not done it for itself, it was not going to happen. People could have got tired sitting around waiting for someone to pick up on what needed to be done in their area. Some of the community groups that I work with are in widely

dispersed rural settlements. They provide the luncheon club, the community venue and the dance classes, and they fundraise locally to ensure that sporting and cultural activities take place in their locality. They have become extremely resilient and inventive. Look at the social economy projects being encouraged all around Northern Ireland now — in many rural areas, communities have had a social economy up and running for years and years because they had to.

Mr Anderson: Yes, they have had to do build that round their churches and clubs. Whatever the situation, they built up a social economy, and they have to be commended for that. In your work over the years, have you seen much movement of resources towards the rural areas, or will that still be a big problem going forward? The criteria for grant funding and so on are against rural areas, so it is not always easy. We all work with community groups, and we find difficulties with the likes of getting plots of land for facilities. The land is not always there, whereas bodies in urban areas have land that becomes available to them. We have seen a holding back, and it will be difficult to bring the communities forward. Have you seen any movement towards the needs of rural dwellers being taken on board to a greater extent?

Ms Clifford: It would be disingenuous of us to say that there has not been a rural agenda in Stormont over the past while. We have seen it with the T:BUC strategy. We produced a report, 'Beyond Belfast', on contested spaces in rural areas, which was written into the strategy. In the past, it was all about peace walls, but the work that we did with the Community Relations Council is enshrined in the document. The fact that there are rural contested spaces in which there are invisible barriers to people accessing services in communities, because they are of one persuasion or the other, has been written into that document. We are not there yet, but we are getting there. There is a lot of work yet to be done in taking on board that rural areas need a fair share of government resources.

We see some very good examples in the Western Trust. Craigavon Area Hospital operates a partial booking system, specifically because people come from far away to access its service. Getting there at 9-00 am or 3-00 pm would be virtually impossible for them, so the hospital offers times linked to a particular bus getting into Craigavon. In that way, people, particularly rural dwellers, can avail themselves of the service at a time that is more suitable to them. It reduces the "do not attends" on the hospital waiting list, and it makes the service more accessible for people who are reliant on public transport.

We have seen some movement — it is not fantastic — towards accommodating rural dwellers. The Western Trust holds ambulatory clinics, which prevent patients having to stay in hospital for five days in order to receive daily antibiotics. People can now get those from a clinic in Omagh. The caveat in all of that is that access to transport is needed to get to Omagh, never mind Altnagelvin, so they need the resource for that. We have seen a rural differential being taken account of, but there is a lot more work to be done.

Mr Anderson: Do you see your organisation having more engagement with the new councils?

Ms Clifford: We will have to. Our job is to articulate the voice of rural communities, specifically people who are in poverty, isolation and rural disadvantage. To get a fair share for rural areas, our job will be to lobby those councils to ensure that they are stepping up to the plate. That will be our role.

Mr A Campbell: I know that the Minister was here briefing you on her intention to look at the possibility of legislation on rural proofing. A few months ago, we raised with the Department the fact that all Departments signed up to rural proofing but that there is no real compulsion or agreement at local government level. There may be an issue to be considered in how councils think through rural proofing when they are thinking about how they deliver their services to a rural hinterland.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much for the presentation. Apologies that I had to nip out for a couple of minutes, but I did hear it. We are talking about anti-poverty and social isolation in the rural areas. Do you see a significant difference between the age groups?

Ms Clifford: There is a definitely an issue with older people, but we have to be careful. I always say that an equal number of children with disabilities are born to parents living in rural and urban areas. Need is need wherever it is. There is a need to be realistic and see that, for a young person who is isolated living in Carrickmore and wants to get back into employment, education or training, there is a bus journey cost for them to get to the FE college in Omagh. We need to take account of the fact that it costs more for a young person living in Carrickmore to access education and training than it does for

someone living in the centre of a town, who can walk to that facility and has access to a number of choices.

Mr Elliott: Does any of your evidence or information suggest that this is worse for either the older generation or younger generation? Living in Carrickmore, Rosslea or wherever is different from living in the centre of a town, where there is much more access to services. In places such as Carrickmore, quite often, your youth club or leisure facilities may be 20 or 30 miles away. Your hospital is probably that distance away as well, and your GP might send you to hospital for a scan. Which generation feels more isolated or socially excluded?

Mr A Campbell: It is hard to point to evidence, Tom. Again, I go back to the evidence collected through MARA. It would be really interesting to see whether such generational information could be gleaned from the MARA database. People from MARA will have talked to, and identified the issues in, those households, so that might answer some of your questions. Statistical evidence shows that families with three or more children are at higher risk of poverty and that, in the rural west, there is a higher proportion of such families in the population. That is an obvious risk group. DSD's family resources survey does not have a detailed geographical breakdown of such families. It talks about the rural west, which also includes large towns. There is a group of people at risk of being in poverty.

Social isolation is a harder concept to pin down. Obviously, older people living alone in a rural community can be isolated. Alternatively, sometimes, in rural areas where people have lived for a long time, there are good community and neighbourhood networks. There can be good support there that people living in cities and towns cannot avail themselves of. People can be very isolated in the middle of a big city. The MARA database is, potentially, really important in interrogating social isolation. There will be a cost in doing that, and deciding who will do that work and what can be invested to pull out that information to inform future programmes is another factor.

Mr Elliott: I do not know whether I really got an answer on whether you think that there is a difference between the generations, but we will leave it at that. My other query is about rural proofing. How important is rural proofing to the future of what we are discussing?

Ms Clifford: It is hugely important. We have been advocates of rural proofing for a very long time. It goes back to the issue of people getting their fair share and making sure that rural areas are no less deprived and get no less investment simply by virtue of the fact that they are rural. As a ratepayer, I pay the same rates in the very isolated rural area in which I live as somebody who lives in the centre of Magherafelt. So, I should not have different access to services, a different service or fewer opportunities than someone else.

Rural proofing is a way of ensuring that rural areas do not lose out and do not fall into deprivation simply by virtue of the fact that they are ignored or forgotten and so not factored in. However, it has to have teeth and some way of compelling Departments to do something about it.

Mr Elliott: Do you believe that it needs a legislative base?

Ms Clifford: I would like that, and I would like it to be on the same agenda as equality. The Acts that deal with the equality agenda and disability discrimination legislated for vulnerable groups and have been very successful. If rural proofing were legislated for or given teeth in some way so that it was given due countenance when considering services and service delivery in order to help the disadvantaged or vulnerable, in whatever context, that could not be a bad thing.

Mr McMullan: We talked about the proof of deprivation in rural areas. In modern times, many young people who emigrate are from rural areas. They emigrate because of a lack of opportunities. They cannot afford to stay at home and not work, they cannot afford to travel to work and there is no work. Social media will tell you that. I know that from talking to some of the young ones at home.

You mentioned disability services. They are all becoming more and more centralised and gravitating towards towns and cities. You now have to go to the services for treatment, whereas you used to go to outpatients for speech treatment, a hearing assessment or whatever else. From talking to members of our disability group at home, I know that they travel further and further each year. They have to make trips in the double figures of miles to access services that they used to travel a few miles to.

When unemployed young people sign on, they are called into unemployment offices 18, 20, 25 and 30 miles from their home. They have to go there at a certain time, which necessitates a journey by bus or

whatever. That could be made a little simpler for the young people. I do not think that the rural and urban contexts of that service are considered, as has been highlighted time and again. You will hear that when you talk to unemployed young people in rural areas. They ask where they will get the money to travel to the unemployment office in order to get the money to live on. There is no need for half of that. More advisers should travel to meet these young people, which was the system in place years ago. That system worked, and it would be more cost-effective than bringing the young people in and having to pay them back and whatnot. It is horrendous what they put young people through, and it is no wonder that many of them are leaving.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I meet a number of organisations that work with rural people and on rural issues. Is there a joined-up approach between the organisations? On the outside, looking in, it looks as though they are fragmented. It would look better if they worked more closely together.

Ms Clifford: We do work very closely together. We are a sister organisation of the Rural Development Council, and the rural support networks were established through the Rural Community Network. It advocated the support and establishment of those organisations across Northern Ireland to ensure complete coverage. I see the organisations as being very strong, but the rural support networks have done a phenomenal job in rolling out MARA. The fact that the infrastructure was in place enabled the Department to put something on the ground very quickly. As an organisation, our job is more about policy and strategic intervention, but the organisations are very much connected: the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), the rural support networks, the Rural Development Council and us. Those links are building and becoming stronger all the time. We are a very functional family of organisations, but we have a niche market, and our organisation is very much focused on advocating for changes in rural development policy.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): There are no more questions. Thank you very much, Kate and Aidan, for your presentation.

Ms Clifford: Thank you for your time.