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Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion:
Rural Development Council

11 November 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion: Rural Development Council

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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
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

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|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Ms Teresa Canavan | Rural Development Council |
| Ms Olga Gallagher | Rural Development Council |
| Mr Michael Kelly | Rural Development Council |

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I welcome Teresa Canavan, chief executive of the Rural Development Council (RDC); Olga Gallagher, director of programmes; and Michael Kelly, director of operations. You can have up to 10 minutes to make a presentation, and that will be followed by members' questions.

Ms Teresa Canavan (Rural Development Council): Thank you, Chair and members, for this opportunity to attend and, indeed, for ensuring that rural poverty and social isolation remain very much part of the agenda. We will present collectively and, obviously, do our best to keep within the time frame and the context of the briefing that we have submitted. However, we will elaborate on key points. I will cover the introduction and general comments in relation to DARD's tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme or TRPSI, as it is referred to internally. Michael and Olga will comment specifically on some of the approaches and work in that area. We want to conclude with ideas and recommendations for the future, and we will respond collectively to questions at the end.

At the outset, I declare the Rural Development Council's (RDC's) involvement in the DARD TRPSI programme as follows. We contributed to the development of the original framework. Looking back at that framework, we confirmed a number of key things. We confirmed that rural poverty and social isolation do exist. That may seem like an obvious finding, but, quite often, the rural "make-do" culture and perception can lead people to think that it does not exist. The framework also confirmed that rural living is different from urban living and that policymakers need to understand how rural living works in order to better target resources. It also found that the gap between those who have and those who have not is getting bigger and that issues of access and lack of information and awareness about what

is available are a key barrier. I suppose that is why collaboration and joint working are so important. The framework also confirmed that there are higher costs of living in rural areas, especially since the need to have a car in rural areas reduces the disposable income.

Other key indicators were available at that time. Among them was the fact that 33% of pensioners living in rural households are experiencing income poverty, compared to 12% in Belfast and 10% in urban areas. Transport, enabling access to services, remains a key issue for rural people; at that time, only 20% of rural households were within 13 miles of a bus stop. Fuel poverty is a much greater problem in Northern Ireland than it is in the rest of the UK, and more rural than urban households experience fuel poverty. This can be due to a number of reasons such as fuel choices, obviously, and the age and condition of rural properties.

We were also involved in the delivery of best practice workshops for the rural challenge programme, in partnership with the Rural Community Network (RCN). The rural challenge is a small-grants initiative designed to target those who are isolated and most in need. To date, there have been two rounds, which have been implemented. Michael will shortly touch on the approach that has been taken in helping to reach communities and individuals most in need.

We are currently engaged in a rural youth entrepreneurship (RYE) programme. It is funded through the programme and is specifically designed to support opportunities for youth enterprise as a means of tackling unemployment and migration. Olga will touch on that.

Finally, we work collaboratively with those involved in other aspects of the programme, such as the farm health checks. We provide a referral process into the FarmSafe Awareness programme. Those are two separate initiatives, as the FarmSafe Awareness programme is funded under the rural development programme and is not specifically designed to focus on poverty. However, the collaborative approach underpinning our work helps to ensure that those who are most isolated have access to this important farm safe message. Similarly we work in collaboration with the maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA) programme in ensuring that services are promoted to those most in need. We are currently running ICT training courses for farmers and farm families, for example, and we work with MARA to ensure that that information reaches those who are most isolated.

These are some of the areas that we are engaged in. We see our role as working to support the development of locally based solutions to tackling the issues. As an organisation, we no longer receive core funding towards any research or policy functions, and, as such, our interventions are focused on how we can address rural need by designing and delivering rural projects and presenting them to the relevant funding bodies. We see our role as translating the challenges into practical actions on the ground.

We welcome the programme and commend DARD for its approach to implementation, which is largely focused on partnership working, collaboration and, most importantly for us, engaging rural stakeholders in communities.

We believe strongly that the practical engagement of local people and communities and projects, such as MARA, have made the difference. We very much doubt whether the same results could have been achieved without the community connections, and we believe strongly that this is an approach that could be adopted in the delivery of schemes across government.

It is also important to recognise the distinctions between poverty and social isolation. Whilst you can find situations with both, they are not mutually exclusive, and you could have a vulnerable person who is living in a relatively affluent area. Indeed, they could own their home and have land, but still find themselves experiencing social isolation, loneliness and becoming unattached from society. The benefit of the programme was its dual approach in recognising the need to tackle and address isolation and poverty. Social isolation by its very nature is more likely to manifest itself in rural areas given the limitation of services, including lack of access to public transport. By targeting social isolation as well as poverty, the programme has had relative success in reaching those most in need.

Michael will touch on some of the approaches that we have adopted in relation to the rural challenge programme and RYE.

Mr Michael Kelly (Rural Development Council): Our engagement in the rural challenge workshops and our implementation of RYE has shown the value of outreach and engagement in addressing challenges, the importance of investing in the proactive targeting of actions and investment in locating

those most in need, rather than simply inviting applications for funding, which can tend to favour stronger groups with more capacity and which, perhaps, do not always target the most vulnerable. We have seen clearly the benefits of development support in helping groups and communities to engage in projects. A grant in itself is not always the answer, but supporting, nurturing and encouraging communities to engage in addressing real community need is money well invested.

We recognise the benefits of using a flexible approach in the delivery of services in rural areas and that a one-size-fits-all approach does not always work best. Different areas present different challenges. Similarly, different sectors, groups and individuals will present different issues. The rural challenge programme, even if it was done through small grants, targeted specific identified sectors, individuals and groupings and thus ensured that it was not a one-size-fits-all approach but was a recognition of different rural circumstances and the communities therein.

This approach is something we feel other Departments could take on board. The advantage of having a compulsory workshop as part of the programme meant that all the organisations that were thinking of applying had access to the same consistent message and were actively encouraged to demonstrate how, even with a small investment, they could target their sectors. It also recognised that it was not all about size and numbers. Even the smallest interventions in reaching those most in need would be considered.

It is also important in considering the approach that, quite often, funding programmes focus on numbers. If you want to tackle rural poverty and social isolation you have to invest in the approach and not simply count the numbers at the end. We all want to see value for money — that is a given — but, within a rural context, it should not simply be about dividing the amount of money allocated among the number of people participating. Locating that one person in a rural area who is most in need may take twice the time and effort that it would take in an urban area. That is something that we are keen to ensure that Departments and others are aware of.

Ms Canavan: Olga will outline more on the RYE project.

Ms Olga Gallagher (Rural Development Council): The RYE programme aims to contribute to rural social and economic development by stimulating latent entrepreneurial abilities among young people in rural Northern Ireland. The programme is addressing issues that lie at the heart of the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework: deprivation; inequalities; poverty, and social exclusion. The combined factors of multiple deprivation affecting rural young people, including cost of living, accessibility, high unemployment, low educational attainment and social isolation, pose particular challenges. Tackling those issues is a priority of RYE.

RYE is a mechanism to target and support young people who live in rural deprived areas by creating opportunities through developing their entrepreneurial skills and ideas. This is being done through awareness-raising, workshop participation, mentoring, developing business action plans and broadening their experience and skills by participating in a network of young rural entrepreneurs. RYE provides outreach workshops, mentoring, business plans and networking opportunities, which will support the young people to address poverty and exclusion in a sustainable manner by giving them early business development skills.

RYE aims to contribute to the elimination of poverty in rural areas by facilitating the development of business action plans. That creates the potential for vulnerable rural young people to start their own businesses, enter the employment market and develop new skills, ultimately contributing to creating active and sustainable rural communities and helping to address youth migration, which is currently high due to the economic downturn. By encouraging self-employment among rural youth, the project not only supports the participant in generating their own business idea and the future income arising from that, but contributes to wider potential job creation and to income being retained and circulated in the local area as the local economy diversifies and grows.

By engaging directly with young people from disadvantaged rural areas, the project contributes to the outcomes of tackling rural poverty and social isolation as it contributes to addressing poverty and social exclusion among that priority group in a way that will help participants to help themselves and contribute to improving the integration and economic sustainability of their rural communities. If we are to develop sustainable rural communities and economies, it is essential that the young in those communities do not leave but instead have adequate support and opportunities for employment within their local area.

Ms Canavan: In conclusion, throughout our years of service we have identified some distinct characteristics that pose particular challenges for delivery in rural areas. These include the difficulty in identifying need. The characteristics of rural social isolation mean that deprivation indicators do not fully reflect the extent of the problem; so rural areas often miss out in their share of funding from targeted programmes. There is a wide range of hidden issues in the countryside, such as seasonal or part-time incomes, unaffordable housing or limited choice, poor access to childcare, education and training, to name but a few. Other ways of measuring rural deprivation are needed. We know that you have heard from the RCN on the work that it is doing in that area. We fully support that and the need to review the deprivation measures.

There is also the challenge of accessibility. Due to the scattered nature of settlements and the sparsity of public transport in many rural areas, people are constrained in their ability to access the services they need. Access to services is the most fundamental distinguishing feature between rural and urban. New ways of delivering services and improving access are core to our work. New and innovative ways of delivering to rural areas must be found.

Michael has already alluded to the challenges of scale. Many rural settlements have, by definition, smaller populations, and therefore struggle to generate critical mass for specific services, leading to a lower level of service provision. This raises the importance of shared, integrated and joined-up approaches to service delivery in order to generate the necessary economies of scale. Whilst the sharing agenda often predominantly focuses on large urban settlements for community relations reasons, which are equally important in rural areas, financial opportunity exists to promote shared rural services to provide more sustainable rural communities. We believe that our work over the years in programmes such as Vibrant Villages, developing rural service centre hubs, integrating community organisations and maximising community space have shown how engaging communities in the provision of services locally can provide local solutions.

Finally, you will be glad to hear, we appreciate that other organisations have presented, and no doubt similar issues and challenges have been communicated, not least in the measurement of deprivation, rural proofing, the need for a greater evidence base and for the dynamics of rural living to be better understood in and across all Departments, which, again, is part of the rural-proofing agenda. These are all important and are part of the foundation for change. We know that budget pressures will obviously place increased pressure to prioritise funding. However, we strongly believe that the tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme, with the role and value it has in addressing the combined challenges of poverty and social isolation, is needed. Without that funding, what would be happening? Collaboration and working together can obviously support budgetary pressures, but the key remaining focus has to be on reaching those who are most in need. It is a collective responsibility for all Departments, not just DARD, to tackle the issues highlighted.

Equally important are the ideas and options to address the challenges. In this respect, we would like to conclude with a couple. We believe that there is a need for an option to retain small grants. They often provide a lifeline to communities and provide essential access to services locally; even if it is as simple as the provision of a community office so that people know where to go and how to access information, or befriending services and working with local communities to ensure that those most in need are identified. Our work with rural youth and our history of rural regeneration and economic development leads us to consider the need for community-supported employment schemes.

I do not want to look back with rose-tinted glasses and show our ages, but the old action for community employment (ACE) scheme provided much needed local employment and training opportunities, including support for local services, at a time not dissimilar to now. In fact, many rural development initiatives grew out of those schemes. Many of them, like the lough eels and Kinturks of this world, continue today. For us, it about finding ways to translate policy into practical tangible actions on the ground. That can be done only with continued financial support combined with the enthusiasm and commitment of local people.

On that note, we have just started the process of forming new local action groups in support of the new rural development programme, which also has a role in tackling poverty. We held our first meetings last night, with well over 100 people turning out. We believe that if we can harness their motivation and interest in developing their areas and work with local and central government, collectively we can address the problems.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Thank you very much for your presentation. In your briefing, you note that the rural challenge fund and the RYE projects have been extremely successful. Can you outline why you think this is so? Are there any key lessons from them that could be carried forward?

Ms Canavan: For us, it has to be the outreach and targeting. Gone are the days when you put an advertisement in the paper, open a programme and expect people to come. If you are going to address rural poverty and social isolation, you have to target local communities. You have to work with them and identify those who are most in need. Both of those programmes had an outreach element. The rural challenge programme had a compulsory workshop where people came along and heard about the programme and initiatives. Most importantly, they shared practice on how you can engage communities and get the best out of a small grant.

The RYE programme is very much based on outreach work and specific targeting. That approach has to be embedded in future programmes. I suppose that, from our perspective, quite often, that can mean that the programme may cost a little bit more; but, as we have already highlighted, you cannot have the same economies of scale when you are dealing with rural populations that are scattered compared to those in urban areas.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): OK. Can you give us an example of an actual project that demonstrates the success that you have talked about?

Ms Canavan: With regard to the rural challenge programme, there was a wide range of projects and small grants. They could have been for befriending services, provision of meals on wheels or luncheon clubs in community halls, for example. There was a wide range of services. There were other financial services available, such as debt management. Those types of initiatives were delivered locally in community centres where people felt comfortable to come and access them. There was a wide range of activities. Small projects and small amounts of money made a huge difference.

Mr McAleer: All the MLAs here represent rural areas. Some areas are very isolated, and there are very few services in them. They either have a very weak community infrastructure or none. How can you get into those communities to identify people who are vulnerable or facing social isolation? How successful is DARD in doing that?

Ms Canavan: In that regard, the MARA project is probably a good example. The programme put local enablers in place — people with local knowledge — to identify those who are most vulnerable. Our mantra is that local people are best placed to identify local solutions. If you can find a mechanism for connecting communities in those processes, you are more likely to be able to access those most in need. The MARA project, with regard to having those local enablers, is one of the key successes in how to reach those most in need.

Mr McAleer: What other organisations do you work with in trying to plug into those hard-to-reach communities?

Ms Canavan: We work very closely with all the organisations in what we call "the rural family". They are Rural Support, the RCN, the rural support networks and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN). Collectively, we work very closely together to ensure that any initiatives, programmes or funding that becomes available reaches those who are most in need.

Mr McAleer: You mentioned LAGs and the rural development programme. Is there an opportunity in the programme to address some of the TRPSI objectives?

Ms Canavan: Absolutely. For us, the new model of delivering LEADER, which has a wider local action group membership and is really about trying to get as many people involved in the process as possible, provides the best opportunity to tackle poverty. The range of measures in priority 6, which includes things like rural services, rural broadband and village renewal, has huge potential in delivering services and reaching those most in need. I think the key challenge will be when it comes to developing strategies. Obviously there is a limited budget and we have to manage expectations, and the key thing will be to align the local needs to the funding priorities, but I think it is achievable.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Teresa and Olga. It is good to see you again. I spent some years down at the RDC, as you are well aware, and I know the good work that you do in Cookstown. I want to touch on the difficulties associated with measuring rural poverty. It is a big issue. We have asked the RCN and others who have come here, but what more do you think can be done? We keep going back to the fact that rural dwellers, by nature, are laid-back people. I am a rural dweller myself. It may be difficult to get the information that you need from those people, who would qualify for a lot of help.

They may not be very good at coming forward with information. How do you work together as a rural family — as you call it, Teresa — to try to tap into that information and get it together?

Ms Canavan: I think we all see the challenges in measuring deprivation, particularly if you use multiple deprivation measures that bring together a range of domains, which, basically, skew the funding, or whatever, to more urban centres because they have higher populations and demonstrate higher needs in the deprivation indices. If you were to separate those out and look at access to services you would get a different picture. You would get more rural communities coming forward regarding deprivation against access to services. So, there are key ways of measuring isolation. If you focus on some indices that are more relevant you would get a different picture.

In relation to working together, we designed and delivered the rural challenge workshops along with the RCN. We delivered that project in partnership. Over the years, we have also delivered the development of rural service centre hubs projects, which were designed to look at new ways of delivering services in rural areas. So, we will try to take whatever opportunity we have to deliver ways of coming together to bring practical solutions to communities. We also collaborate strongly with Rural Support. It has a helpline and works directly with the farming community. In more recent years, the RDC has developed a relationship and programmes with the farm sector. We deliver farm safety awareness and ICT training to the farm family. We work very closely with Rural Support in ensuring that those services and programmes reach those who are most in need.

It really is about collaboration, signposting and being able to share information with one another. If we are aware of somebody who is in financial stress, we can signpost them to Rural Support, and so forth. We feel that we work very well together. It is about sharing information and making connections. We want to be able to give anybody who contacts us the right information and to signpost them quickly.

Mr Anderson: You have touched on the LAGs and the new rural programme. Are you finding a willingness there? Did you touch on some meeting that you had recently? Is there a willingness in the rural community now to come forward and really get involved?

Ms Canavan: We have only started the process. The first public meeting was last night and we have another one tonight. In fact, there will be nearly 50 public meetings across Northern Ireland to try to engage people in wider LAG membership.

This time around you will have a wider LAG membership plus a LAG board. Those members can then get involved in some more networking activities and cooperation to support the work of the board. We were pleasantly surprised when over 100 people turned out. They seemed to be genuinely interested in the programme and in playing their part in developing their strategy for the local area; so, we have been very encouraged to date. We feel that the model is more in line with the LEADER principles on engaging and mobilising local people to take decisions. It also puts a bit of accountability in place between the board and the community, because, ultimately, the members will have a say in who represents their area on the board.

Mr Anderson: OK. Thank you very much. It is good to see you again.

Ms Canavan: Thank you, Sydney.

Mr Buchanan: Some of this may have been touched on, but we all know that the delivery of services in rural areas is always challenging and difficult because of the rural nature of it and all of that type of thing. Do you think the right approach has been taken, or does that need to change?

Ms Canavan: Our experience suggests that you can find new ways of delivering services. Quite often, we feel that some service providers think that it is all or nothing: provide a fixed service for whatever the opening hours are or, when there are budgetary difficulties, the solution is to remove the full service. Over the last number of years, particularly with the developing rural service centre programme, we have seen that you can find new ways of delivering for rural communities. You can look at joined-up services. In a couple of our projects, the post office moved into the local community centre. In another, the post office moved into the pharmacy. We delivered a rural retail support programme, which was about trying to retain retail services locally in villages and communities. That sometimes meant sharing services or changing opening hours. There are different ways. You can also have mobile services. Obviously, improved broadband — we know and appreciate that not

everybody can access broadband — and the continued development in that area brings with it new ways of developing services.

The other thing that we were involved in was the maximising community halls programme. We worked with communities that owned or managed halls in the area on how they could open them up for greater services. We would like more work to be done on school and other community buildings to ensure that they can also be opened up for service provision, but the days of assuming that rural people have come to expect the service to remain the same are gone. There is a realisation in rural communities that services need to change. If you work with communities, you can find a solution. An immediate reaction can be the withdrawal of a service, and we do not want to go there. It is more about trying to find a solution, should that be changing hours or changing the way that a service is delivered.

Mr Buchanan: We know that there are some areas where it is extremely difficult to get broadband. In west Tyrone, for example, there are a number of issues, such as black spots. Is getting broadband into such areas one of the biggest delivery challenges, or are you facing other more severe or bigger challenges?

Ms Canavan: It is one of the challenges, but not everybody necessarily wants to have or use broadband. The rural youth entrepreneurship programme that we deliver has an online tool, and young people need to access that. Where there are "not-spots" or where people cannot access broadband, that presents challenges in being able to deliver that service. It is not the only challenge. Not everybody is comfortable with or confident about using online services. We deliver a programme at the moment to support the farm family to access online services, and the uptake is huge, but we appreciate that not everybody will want to do that. There have to be alternative mechanisms and ways to access those people.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much for your presentation. You mentioned ACE. I thought that you would be too young to remember ACE.

Ms Canavan: I just vaguely remember it.

Mr McCarthy: It was a fantastic scheme. I do not know who was responsible for doing away with it, but, surely, it was replaced. Is there nothing similar at the moment? In my area, there is nothing comparable to ACE.

Ms Canavan: We are not aware of anything comparable. We were looking back on ACE and how it not only provided local employment but connected to communities. If you look round the countryside, you will see the number of community halls or facilities that might have been built through ACE schemes and the number of people who were supported to stay in their home because ACE and caring services were provided. We are looking at it more in that context. We do not see anything comparable at the moment that provides the opportunity for communities to work together in supported employment and provide services locally. We feel that there is an opportunity, particularly in tackling youth unemployment and unemployment in general, and in the provision of services.

Mr McCarthy: I am surprised — we have a very young, energetic Minister for Employment and Learning who likes to help in these areas. Is there nothing that he has provided through DEL? I know that budgets have just been cut, but, up to now, has there not been anything?

Ms Canavan: There have been other youth employment schemes, but none that is about delivering services in the local area. There is a wealth of community infrastructure in rural communities. All of those buildings have to be maintained, serviced and looked after. If there is some way of engaging local communities in encouraging the maintenance of those buildings, that will help community sustainability. There may be other schemes and apprenticeships, but they are not necessarily targeted specifically at rural areas, keeping employment local or encouraging people to engage in community activities.

Mr McCarthy: Thank you very much. Keep up the good work.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation and appreciate what the RDC has done. I suspect that you will review the functions and role that you can fulfil in the future. Bear in mind that we are talking about

RYE and the rural challenge programme. What can RDC do to help and enable social economy projects to develop and, particularly, to involve enterprising young people?

Ms Canavan: We see ourselves, first, as a social enterprise, and we promote that. Historically, as a grant funder, our delivery of the rural development programme has focused on developing social enterprise. We have put in place a range of projects and programmes on building people's capacity and community capacity to deliver social enterprise projects. We feel that the opportunity still exists for us to support communities and engage them in looking at how they can come up with ideas, prepare business plans and feasibility studies and, then, identify and source funding.

Mr Byrne: I accept that, but, given the challenges associated with trying to keep rural communities alive, I see a bleaker future for younger people if we do not involve them at an earlier stage and get them involved in some sort of employment creation or social economy projects, with enablement and support from statutory agencies such as yours. Can you be more challenging and more innovative in your approach?

Ms Canavan: The RYE project is very much focused on engaging young people. We are looking at how we can network and bring those young people together in support of other initiatives. Trying to engage young people is one of the key target areas under the new rural development programme. Historically, that has been difficult. We have researched how to engage young people, particularly in rural development, and we believe that we can put forward some ideas in the new LEADER programme. Young people may not necessarily want to move into committees and structures immediately, so, within the new rural development programme, we want to invite their participation in building their capacity through thematic activities and engagement in projects that are time bound, have specific outcomes and will help to support their development in the future. It is challenging. We know that they are a hard-to-reach group, but, through targeted and outreach work, we can see that they are coming on board.

Ms Gallagher: Sometimes, we find that, once you engage with the youth and get their interest, they are highly motivated and have drive and enthusiasm. It is about getting their interest, initially, and finding the catch to get them involved. We have found that establishing a youth steering group — young people feel that they are inputting into the process and helping to shape the design of workshops and networking activities etc — is one way to maintain their involvement without their feeling that they are becoming involved in a heavy-duty board with external obligations. They are able to feed in their ideas about what can be improved, what can work and what would interest their peers. That has been working very well. Once you get their interest, they will get involved. That is key.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much for the presentation, folks. There are a number of issues, but I will try to refine my questions to one or two. Earlier, Teresa, you said that funding is not everything and that there is more to do than that. Providing a support mechanism is one opportunity; providing employment is another. Where do you see the main focus? Should the priority be employment? Should it be trying to keep younger people in the area? Should it be access to services? Where are the particular priorities for rural areas?

Ms Canavan: From our perspective, as an organisation that focuses on rural regeneration, we have always had an economic outlook. It has been about trying to support and sustain services, but, through doing that, creating employment locally. That has been embedded in our organisation since we started in 1991. We always see local employment as a key driver to addressing poverty in rural communities, and we would like to see that continue to be supported. We also see that that can be done through social enterprise, which is about engaging communities in that process. It is not solely about creating private-sector business; it is also about building a strong social enterprise. So, employment will always be up there, but the service delivery and the models of ensuring that communities can access services are equally important.

You repeated the point about funding not being everything. Over the years, we have found that it is easy to put out a call for applications, get them in and then give funding to a group. However, if the groups are not supported through those processes to help to build their capacity, there is more of a chance of them failing in their outcomes. So, we tend to ensure that there is always a developmental support element in any programme that we deliver or design so that the group will get the required support throughout its implementation. Sometimes, that can be as simple as helping with procurement, helping to appoint an architect and other practical things that will enable the project to happen. We have found that programmes can fail when groups are provided with the funding but no support. The two must be joined up and integral. You cannot do one without the other.

Mr Elliott: If you were to point to three areas in the rural community that should be priorities, what would you point to?

Ms Canavan: Do you mean geographically?

Mr Elliott: No.

Ms Canavan: I was getting worried.

Mr Elliott: I mean in terms of facilitation, services, employment, further education and education.

Ms Canavan: That is a hard question to answer because different priorities result in different outcomes. I still think that economic development and employment are key requirements in sustaining rural communities, helping to keep young people there and helping to deliver service locally. Education, outreach work and access to health are equally important, and I do not think you can divorce one from the other. However, employment and having local employment options are key to sustaining the rural economy.

Mr Elliott: In rural areas, is the older generation more disadvantaged than the younger generation, or vice versa?

Ms Canavan: Again, that is difficult. Michael mentioned that different sectors and different individuals will have different issues. One size does not fit all. It is very hard to determine whether young people are more vulnerable or socially isolated than older people. They present different challenges and issues. I am afraid that there is no one answer to that. Through the rural challenge fund, for example, DARD identified a number of sectors, including the elderly, young people, lone parents, ethnic minorities and the disabled. So, the Department recognises that there are different circumstances and that the isolation and poverty issues of a range of people need to be supported differently. There is no straightforward answer to that one, sorry.

Mr McMullan: I apologise for being absent earlier. One group that never seems to get any leeway or priority is those in the community who have disabilities or special needs. That group is an integral part of any community. There is always a fight to get any services or help for them — integration into youth clubs or whatever. How do they figure in your overall plan?

Ms Canavan: They were a key sector in the rural challenge programme, and it was recognised that people with disabilities who live in a rural area are presented with different challenges, particularly in relation to access to services. Moving forward, within the rural development programme, funding to support organisations working with the disabled will be available. It is about connecting services, looking at how communities can support those services and perhaps looking at social enterprise as a mechanism to bring services into rural areas as well.

Mr McMullan: Surely we know all of that by now, with all the programmes that we have run over the years. Still, we have not even one or two programmes for that sector of the community. We are making a lot of the rural development programme. Do you agree that we are putting the cart before the horse here, in that the community plans are not even done? I think that it was a major fault that a time frame was not put on the community plan. In fact, it is voluntary, which I thought was totally wrong from the start. I cannot see how this circle can be squared. We are running ahead with other programmes without having made a community plan. Still, nobody can tell be about one programme tailored to the needs of the disabled and special needs group rather than lumping them in with a group in the community and saying, "They can get the funding for them" and, "They can do something."

Ms Canavan: There is the opportunity in the rural development programme to look at how that sector gets involved. We hope that that comes forward with the development of local strategies. The idea is that the rural development programme and the strategy development element of community planning will knit very neatly together, which they should, through the local action group and the LEADER methodology, which is a community planning process that involves local people in the decision-making processes. We hope that as the community planning process evolves, the rural development programme can knit with and fit into it and that strategy development can become an integral part of the community planning process. Through that, hopefully, the voices and needs of different sectors, including those with disabilities, will come forward and solutions will be found. We are not aware of or working on any specific programmes that target only the disabled sector. That said, it was an

identified grouping in the rural challenge programme and can be an identified grouping moving forward in rural services or the rural development programme.

Mr McMullan: Chair, any parent or group will tell you that when a child leaves school at 19 years old, there is nothing for them. The yardstick is there, but we still have not been able to do anything about it. No matter what we say or do, there is no programme for that. We are not even joining up with social services, the health boards or anything else to deliver one. It is left to community groups to do their own thing and try to do something themselves. I honestly think that you need to sit down and develop a clear, structured plan ahead for that grouping and not leave it to individuals or other groups to devise a plan to apply for funding to the rural programme, for example. They deserve a lot better. Thank you very much, anyway.

Ms Canavan: We certainly agree that a number of young people presenting themselves through the rural youth entrepreneurship programme really do not have or cannot see an opportunity to stay in their rural area. We hope that the rural youth entrepreneurship programme will stimulate the idea that you can create a job, not just look for one. We hope that it can encourage young people to create jobs. I go back to the ACE-type scheme whereby you could offer young people an opportunity to engage in community-type development.

Mr McMullan: If only the ACE scheme were back.

Ms Canavan: I know. We will come back to you in a few years' time.

Mr McMullan: Maybe, some years in front of us, it will come back.

Ms Canavan: We might have to reinvent or rename it.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): There are no other questions. Thank you, again, for your presentation.