



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Poverty and Social Inclusion:
Ulster Farmers' Union and Northern Ireland
Agricultural Producers' Association

18 November 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne

Witnesses:

Mr Jim Carmichael	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Michael Clarke	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Wesley Aston	Ulster Farmers' Union
Ms Freda Magill	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr David McConaghy	Ulster Farmers' Union

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I welcome the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) representatives; Freda Magill, the rural affairs policy chair; David McConaghy, the rural affairs policy officer; and Wesley Aston, the policy director. From the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA), we have Michael Clarke, chairperson, and Jim Carmichael, the development officer.

Please take no more than approximately 10 minutes to address the Committee, and that will be followed by questions.

Mr Wesley Aston (Ulster Farmers' Union): Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you for inviting us along today. Obviously, the whole issue of anti-poverty and social inclusion is very important, particularly from the rural perspective, and we want to make sure that our views are included. We are pleased that you are conducting a review and we welcome the opportunity to have an input here this morning.

At the outset, we should say that we always had issues about the fact that this was being seen as a Department of Agriculture issue. We are pleased that the Department has taken it, but it is a much wider initiative than just solely the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture. We feel that, through the rural white paper for example, it is important that all Departments play their roles in looking at anti-poverty and social inclusion in rural areas and that it is not left solely to DARD.

Without further ado, I will hand across to Freda, who will maybe say a few overarching words. We will then go to David who will give you a bit more detail from our perspective.

Ms Freda Magill (Ulster Farmers' Union): The rural affairs committee welcomes the opportunity to highlight a lot of things about which we have had great concern for some time.

When we consider rural proofing, one of the first things that come to mind is poverty. Poverty is important; it is an economic deprivation. However, there are lots of other aspects of deprivation that are of much more importance to people's lives.

Economic privation is one thing. When you cannot get around, when there is no transport available, when a four year old has to get two buses to go to school and two buses to get back from school, when children are picked up in one of those little buses that goes round picking up rural children and, three quarters of an hour later, they get back to the starting point and then go to school, it is a very long day. Those children cannot take part in after-school activities because they have no way of getting home. Elderly people are in much the same position if they do not drive, do not have a vehicle or their eyesight is not too good and they cannot drive. They are confined. Public transport is wonderful and Translink does a superb service, but it is not on all the roads and it is not always accessible to people.

The other thing is health care. When people need to access health care, with the centralisation of hospitals and with acute hospitals being so far apart, even for simple consultations, people may have to leave home at the crack of dawn and take two or three buses and get back late at night or get a neighbour or someone to take them. If you live in an urban area, you would not suffer that; it would not enter into the equation.

There are other things such as having more overheads. If you want food, you have to travel further. You may not have a large supermarket nearby and the food may cost more.

The other thing that is of great concern to the union is the isolation of many people working on farms. Because of economics, one partner in the partnership tends to have to go out and earn the real money while the other is at home farming. I am not trying to be facetious here. If you want to have a cash flow, you have to have a regular salary. The person at home is carrying all the problems and stress that comes with bureaucracy, form filling, inspections, trying to get everything right and trying to keep up to date with everything.

I have noticed that when you go along to meetings with DARD about, for instance, nitrates or something, you could have four speakers, and each one knows his own field wonderfully but cannot answer a question on an associated area and has to ask a colleague — and this is only in nitrates. The farmers who are there have to be au fait with everything.

This stress has a very bad effect on people, especially if they work alone. It has been proven that the incidence of farm accidents and safety as a whole increases because of the stress, and it is even more dangerous when people have no companions to make sure that working with livestock is safe. That can lead to various forms of illness.

So, the specific issues are older people and lone workers. People with disabilities are compromised greatly. If they lived in an urban area, they would not have the same disadvantages that they have because they happen to be in a more remote location. All of this leads to inequality of opportunity for families and individuals.

I mentioned children and after-school activities, but that is only a small facet. People are not in a position to take part in lots of things that they probably would take part in if they lived in urban rather than rural areas. I will hand over to David now.

Mr David McConaghy (Ulster Farmers' Union): Thanks Freda. Mr Chairman and members of the Committee, I will continue what Freda has said. I submitted a paper to you last week, so I will just run through some of the key points.

The two important points that we have made are the two recommendations in the paper. The first one was for joined-up departmental work between the different Departments of the Assembly and Executive. It seems to be that anything rural falls to DARD to be left to take care of, whereas other Departments do not seem to have the resources or the expertise. I do not know the explanation for dealing with issues that are specifically rural.

There was a commitment to carry out rural proofing assessments on legislation that could have a disproportionate impact on rural areas, which DARD is currently carrying out a review on, but it does not seem to have been adhered to. In my time in the union, I have come across only one consultation where a rural proofing assessment was carried out.

When other Departments are not focusing on issues that affect rural areas in particular, the specific issues that need to be considered are lost. In particular, issues that we have seen around access to services, the higher cost of service delivery, greater travel needs, lack of communication, small economic markets, infrastructure, the land-based industry and the lack of concentrated needs do not seem to factor into policymaking as much as they should in other Departments. We hope that the rural proofing assessment that is being carried out at the minute will go some way to dealing with that, but that remains to be seen.

The other recommendation we made was for the need for an evidence-based approach, with more research carried out into specific issues that affect the rural parts of the Province currently. I recently did a bit of work with Rural Support, and we looked at dyslexia. We talked about ideas, but we kept running up against the problem that we did not know exactly how big an issue it was and what the main causes were. So, we would like to see research done into issues like that so that resources can be more effectively targeted going forward.

Obviously, there will be constraints on budgets, and we would like to see resources targeted effectively to the needs that exist.

As well as that, to prevent duplication of effort, there needs to be good stakeholder engagement to link with people who are already doing a lot of good work, such as the Rural Community Network, Rural Support and maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA), which were all set up under the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) framework. There needs to be good communication between all those bodies to make sure that they are not overlapping. There are inefficiencies that do not necessarily need to be there.

I will go back to some of the specific issues that Freda mentioned. With regard to the issue of older people, the average age of farmers is very high. Obviously, age brings its own difficulties, but the one that I have noticed in my experience is the fear of losing a driving licence. When you lose your driving licence, you depend on public transport, which may or may not exist. For that reason, many older people will keep driving when it may not be safe for them to do so, but given the lack of infrastructure, they do not think that they have a choice. Rural people are brought up having to be independent, and the loss of independence is something that they dread.

The other issue Freda mentioned was lone workers, and we have significant concerns about that. As Freda mentioned, the health and safety impacts, or issues, for lone workers are quite severe because there is simply nobody there to keep an eye on what is going on. We have heard of things that you can get on your iPhone now to track movement, and we are trying to encourage our members to use those things so that somebody can check whether they stop moving for a while and can raise an alarm or something like that. These issues need to be recognised at policy level, as well as through small things on the ground.

I have already touched on the issue of disabilities. Statistics show that deaths recorded as suicide in rural areas increased from 47 in 2001 to 99 in 2010, which is a substantial increase and highlights a problem that exists in rural areas. The number in urban areas also went up, but we think that the specific issues we have already mentioned, which concern rural areas, need to be factored into any research into the cause of mental health difficulties in rural areas.

Another issue we have is vulnerability. When you live alone in an isolated area you will feel vulnerable. We have seen cutbacks to the police service and other security services. There is a perception in rural areas that the police are just not there any more. That has led, especially with an ageing population, to a lot of fear and anxiety among older people, who do not necessarily feel safe any more. I appreciate that the police have to work within budget and prioritise what they spend, and, by and large, we do not have any real issues with the police. However, the perception exists among rural people.

Another issue is the lack of services that exist in rural areas for certain groups such as women. I met the Rural Women's Network, and its members highlighted a number of issues, particularly to do with finances and caring. Often, the woman in a rural family is left to look after her parents and the husband's parents as well. When you are isolated and have such a great commitment as those

people have taken on, it is very isolating and you are, by the very nature of the situation, fighting a losing battle. Support is needed for those dealing with that particular issue. With the closure of respite centres in rural areas, the needs of those people are probably not being addressed as well as they could be.

That is most of what we want to cover. However, I turn your attention to the financial pressures on farms. As Freda mentioned, cash flow is a major issue for a lot of farmers. They are asset rich but cash poor. That presents a lot of problems in real time for paying bills and that sort of thing. Rural Support has started a financial stress mentoring scheme, which we are very impressed with so far. We hope to see that scheme extended, because the problem of financial pressures does not seem to be going away.

Finally, I want to mention the definition of poverty that is used. In the paper, I quote UNESCO, which says:

"To further develop the definition of the concept of relative poverty or relative deprivation, three perspectives are relevant; the income perspective indicates that a person is poor only if his or her income is below the country's poverty line (defined in terms of having income sufficient for a specified amount of food); the basic needs perspective goes beyond the income perspective to include the need for the provision by a community of the basic social services necessary to prevent individuals from falling into poverty; and finally, the capability (or empowerment) perspective suggests that poverty signify a lack of some basic capability to function."

The multiple deprivation measure (MDM) used by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) seems to focus disproportionately on the financial aspect. Trutz Haase is coming to brief the Committee in the near future, so I will not say any more on that in the meantime, because he is much more qualified to speak on that than I am. However, we would like to see the human aspect of poverty and deprivation factored into these things and we would like to be able to pinpoint rural areas where poverty exists. It is not like in urban areas, where specific regions, which are almost fenced off, have issues with poverty and others do not. In rural areas, they exist intermingled. One person could be in poverty and the person down the road could be in relative affluence. We are not sure that the MDM takes that into account at present.

That is all that I have to say. I will hand over to my colleagues in NIAPA.

Mr Michael Clarke (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association): We welcome the opportunity to have an input into the discussion on rural inclusion. It is something that is close to our heart in that we represent a lot of the rural isolated in the farming community. We have been involved with the Farm Crisis Network as far back as 20 years ago. We welcome that this issue now seems to be being addressed better than it was in the past.

We were also heavily involved in the campaign for people who were isolated and who had no water, through the farm bore wells scheme. That has been, largely, a success. We campaigned for 10 years for some people to get water, and that took a long time. Some things are hard to get delivered. Hopefully, these things will become more available. I will now hand over to Jim, as he has more information on this.

Mr Jim Carmichael (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association): I will be fairly brief, because, first, my voice is going and, secondly, a lot of the points have been covered.

There is no distinct difference between isolation and poverty in rural areas. I listened to the radio this morning, and fuel poverty affects 40% of households. There was a discussion and debate going on about that. The same things impact but in different ways. There was mention of isolation on farms, and we are, and have been for a long time, concerned about isolation.

Somebody mentioned the Rural Women's Network, and I noted before, when they were discussing this, that they mentioned the availability of childcare. Some people might think that it is an odd quirk. There was talk about the main breadwinner in a household, and in quite a lot of situations the woman in the house, or the housewife, is actually in full time employment. That is OK. We had the situation quite recently, where we had farmers come in and say, "We have two children, perhaps now three. We could afford childcare." Others say, "I am a part-time farmer who could go and get other income." Two or three people have mentioned to me that affordable childcare is cheaper for the person — and I am talking about the male in the family not the female that people may associate with this. It is

knocking back families, in general, to have to stay at home rather than pay for childcare for two or three children. So, there is an impact on families.

We have been involved with the Farm Crisis Network, which is now the farm Community Network, for over 20 years. It was the precursor of Rural Support. It was Eleanor Gill who brought this into Northern Ireland. The Ministers of Health and Agriculture linked together to look at something in the early 2000s. Again, we were involved with the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) during the time of the foot-and-mouth disease, the reapplications, and all applications. In fact, they went across the water to RABI, came through our office, and were vetted either successfully or unsuccessfully.

Really and truly, it does not matter what aspect you take. We looked at rural transport. We do a lot of face-to-face work with farmers every year, at the time of the single farm payment and through various cases. We get a lot of anecdotal evidence from them, not only about their own farming family but about people beside them and the situations they are in. We have been working in various areas, getting people linked with transport in our own area in Magherafelt, where there is "out and about" transport. It is a good link for people who cannot access transport or do not have the means to do their shopping etc. People with their own cars are involved, as well as people with vans etc.

Generally, we are very concerned about the present situation. Linking up was mentioned. We have always found that there seems to be a distinct isolation in Departments, where everyone works on their own. We have noticed, since the foot-and-mouth disease, since Rural Support came in, and since various other initiatives have come to the fore, that there has been more joined-up thinking. There is one difficulty, which is coming out now. At the minute, the new councils are holding consultations on community development plans for the future. When you go along to those consultations, you hear the same problems that we are talking about here coming through at the local rural level there. Hopefully, not only will it be through DARD or whatever, but at local government level that a lot more can be done on this. I will leave it at that.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): OK. Thank you both very much for your presentation. I know that the measurement of deprivation is difficult, but what do you see as the biggest issue in that? I am a farmer myself — I declare an interest — and I see those in the rural community who are probably quite wealthy but choose to live frugally. It is a way of life. For example, I know a guy who would not know what he is worth, but he still lives in poverty. To me, that seems strange, but you have that sometimes in the rural community.

Mr Aston: I think that that is one of the points that David alluded to, so I will hand over to him to elaborate on it a bit further.

Mr McConaghy: In the measurement of deprivation in rural areas, it is difficult to identify exactly where people are in deprivation, because poverty is not segregated in the way that it could be in some urban areas. You could have one person living here in relative poverty, while their neighbours have different levels of affluence and deprivation. The MDM is able to measure deprivation in urban areas and can identify areas that are in need, but it is so much more difficult to do that in rural areas.

As well as that, there is the distinction between capital and cash. A lot of farmers have a lot of assets which, if they added up their worth, would be quite substantial; but all those things are necessary to keep the business afloat. If they sold off any of those assets, the business would not be able to continue at all. That is part of the problem.

So there are two issues: one is being able to identify which areas or people are in need. Maybe we should not say "areas", when we mean "rural dwellers". As well as that, there is the difference between cash flow and assets. There is also the issue, just when you mention cash flow, of debt; a lot of farmers had to borrow quite substantially to scale up, as alluded to in the paper. The number of small and medium-sized farms have decreased greatly, and there has been a drive towards intensification and expansion in farming, so there has been quite a lot of borrowing as well. As well as that, there is the impact that global events can have on commodity prices. The crisis in the Ukraine had such an impact on milk prices. There is an element of unpredictability in forecasting future income which does not make measuring deprivation and poverty any easier in rural areas.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your briefing. Let me take the opportunity to congratulate the Ulster Farmers' Union on the work it has done to highlight rural crime. We had an excellent farming

conference in Crumlin Road Gaol, of all places, a couple of weeks ago. I want to commend you for the work you have done to highlight that.

I suppose, Wesley, that this question is directed primarily to you. With reference to rural isolation, do you feel that measures taken to increase farm safety reach farmers who live in rural isolation? I feel that, all too often, urban solutions are offered to rural problems. Do you feel that enough is being done to highlight that?

Mr Aston: I will ask Freda to comment on this as well. Farm safety is the specific issue that you raise, and there is a difficulty in trying to communicate that to people who are more isolated. Certainly, the usual media channels used, the electronic stuff like websites and those sorts of things, are not there to the same extent. We depend very much on local newspapers and word of mouth for spreading the news around. Unfortunately, because a lot of people are isolated, they will not have the same contact, particularly as they get older. I think that there is an issue about how you communicate with them, in trying to put across a particular farm safety viewpoint.

Ms Magill: The union is a part of the Farm Safety Partnership. I am sure that everyone has heard of that. It involves working with the Health and Safety Executive, some other bodies, and DARD as well. In the Farm Safety Partnership, we have been working tirelessly to make sure that people are aware of what is happening. We have an outreach system of training health-and-safety ambassadors, who have a basic training in health and safety on farms. They address groups like Young Farmers' Clubs, parish meetings, schools and any kind of organisation that they think they can go to. They will also go to agricultural shows. They will try to have a presence at any kind of event. We will be more than willing to take up an invitation to address any group on health and safety. It sounds quite boring, but it is not. There is a lot of very good film material, literature and first-hand reports from people who have experienced accidents. Once you have seen one or two of those, you just do not forget them. We are trying to take that out into all levels of the community and to all levels of isolation, whether it is busy or remote, to encourage people to come to the meetings.

Coming out of that, we have our outreach ambassadors. They, in turn, will train what we call consuls, who are just behind ambassadors. They are people in the community who are well versed in health and safety and can colloquially talk to others at sale yards and different meetings. That is one of the ways that we are trying to get the message across to isolated people.

Mrs Dobson: You can never underestimate the power of the rural grapevine and word of mouth. Further and higher education colleges often offer classes in rural locations across Northern Ireland. I am thinking about Orange halls, church halls and farmers' halls. That provision often ensures that people living in isolated communities are able to avail themselves of the importance of IT training and other specific topics. Do you agree that the classes should be expanded rather than reduced, given that they are under considerable threat? I raised this issue a few weeks ago. For many people, it is so important. When each of you presented, rural isolation kept coming up, so not only are they getting training but classes help them to interact with their friends and other farmers. That is particularly the case for elderly people, who are gaining IT skills while having a purpose for getting out of the house. The classes are located close to their home in farmers' halls and Orange halls, for example. Do you agree that the classes should be expanded rather than reduced?

Ms Magill: I agree wholeheartedly. DARD would be doing very well to help to spearhead that. It happens to some extent, but it is very limited. As you said, it is a great way of getting people in a community together to relate to one another, but there is also the grapevine effect of things coming. There are many changes coming now in agriculture, especially regulatory changes. Getting to people in that manner is an excellent idea, and it would be wonderful if DARD could follow that up with energy and vigour.

Mrs Dobson: Finally, Wesley, has the union worked alongside the colleges to promote the courses? I take it that it is something that the Ulster Farmers' Union would very much encourage. Have you worked alongside them?

Mr Aston: In general, where a college approaches us about a course that we are running, we try to communicate that as widely as we can. Going back to Freda's point, the extension of services rather than centralisation is important not just for the provision of the service but the status work on building communities and moving away from being isolated. It is much more than the service in its own right; it is about getting people out of their houses.

Mrs Dobson: They are so widespread in the community.

Mr Aston: Yes. Anything that you can spread more widely in the community is a reason for being there. A lot of people live in rural areas and do not even know who their neighbours are.

Mrs Dobson: So, it is important that the Ulster Farmers' Union gets behind it.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Does anyone want to comment?

Mr Carmichael: There are a couple or three things there. We are involved with farm safety, and the Rural Development Council (RDC) is also involved in courses, as I am sure you are aware. A number of years ago, we were saying that, under section 75, numeracy and literacy in a lot of areas are particular problems as far as rural areas and farmers are concerned. We persist in saying that. You do not see that until you get somebody to try to complete paperwork, and then you discover that perhaps they cannot do it. One of the tell-tale signs is people coming with pre-signed cheques.

We have been involved in setting up classes. In fact, I will leave you some paperwork. Prior to DARD's involvement, we had our own classes funded 10 years ago. We got laptops and located them here and there and got DARD staff to facilitate them. We saw the need for that, and there is still a need for it. The difficulty is getting people in rural areas to participate. It came to the fore in the young farmers' scheme when people were applying for it. We had a lot of queries from people who felt that their peer group might look at them disapprovingly if they did not have the same level of education going into the course. It is hard to convince some people that it will suit them and that they can do it. That is at one level.

Mrs Dobson: What about older people?

Mr Carmichael: It involves older people too. We want to target those areas. I come back again to local government and community development. In a lot of the areas that we work in, local groups are doing community development work with older people.

Mrs Dobson: And with the colleges.

Mr Carmichael: Yes, with the colleges. However, that needs to be developed. The difficulty with all this, as we noted, is that it is not a short-term fix. A lot of this has happened over a number of years. Programmes have started, and all of a sudden, funding is withdrawn. People then get disillusioned with what is going on. If something is to be done, it needs to have continuity and secure funding and to last for a while, otherwise people will drop off, as has happened.

Mrs Dobson: Very much so.

Mr Milne: Thank you both for your presentation. I thought it was very good. One thing I picked up was that there is an emphasis on joined-up thinking between different Departments. When you talk like that, I start to wonder whether there is a belief in both your organisations that, no matter what DARD does, it will never be enough to resolve the problems that have existed in the countryside for most of my lifetime. We are talking about rural isolation, transport, children, schools, the elderly, youth and all that stuff. Are you saying that there is now a realisation in both groups that one Department on its own will never resolve or sort out those problems?

Mr Aston: As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, our concern, Ian, is that, when the Department became the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the word "rural" was put in. Our previous Minister, Michelle Gildernew, pulled together a rural White Paper as the starting point to that, and we noticed and were concerned that most Departments were looking at transferring responsibility for whatever they were doing in rural areas because the Department's name had the word "rural". It actually turned out to be the opposite; it was trying to suck Departments in to make sure that they rural proofed. Unfortunately, we have not seen that come through. DARD is reassessing the whole thing, but, having heard what we said, you will know that that is not happening on the ground as yet. We face a lot of inequalities in our rural services, more so because of isolation and a lack of facilities and ability to do things. We feel that it has gone the opposite way. We are encouraged that the reassessment is taking place. However, a lot of people live in rural areas, and they should be treated the same as urban dwellers.

Mr Carmichael: The various things that you mentioned are the same in rural and urban areas. You have health, education and all sorts of things that are the remit of different Departments. So, from our point of view, it is common sense that, if various Departments are dealing with differing issues, there are cross-cutting themes. Surely to goodness, as Wesley said, everything should be rural proofed or Departments could work in cooperation with each other, which some are starting to do. However, it is not obvious to everybody that there is full cooperation. There are a lot of funding issues in this, and, as I said, everybody is protecting their budget.

Mr Milne: You mentioned, Jim, the community planning aspect of it and local government. You say you saw this as a very good thing, which I also think it is. However, there is an expectation out there that the new local government structures will be the solution to all the problems. They will not be. At the end of the day, funding has to come from somewhere. That is my opinion. Is it your opinion that that funding has to be reinforced by central government?

Mr Carmichael: Listen to the discussions about local government. We have talked about Northern Ireland as a whole and about trying to get things to come from the establishment down to individual areas. In my opinion, there needs to be funding there because there are people in local areas — we are talking about peer groups — who can spread the word and deliver through notices in local bulletins and so on. You want to get down there.

We were having a chat about that ourselves. We find that if the establishment or agencies — whatever you want to call it — get involved, people in agriculture are inclined to see them as people who are coming to see what penalties they can impose as opposed to coming to help. There is not enough local help for people. When you go back and talk to people, you find that a lot of them, even with all the opportunities that there are through newspapers and all the other forms of media, still do not have the information, or they have misinformation. They are not sure.

Mr M Clarke: As Jo-Ann touched on, there should be more emphasis on provision in Orange halls and football clubs or community centres, depending on where you are. Farmers in isolated areas may relate better to somebody they know. As Jim said, if they see somebody coming who looks like a bureaucrat, they think negatively and say "I'm not going to tell them anything."

I know that the MARA project has been trying and has had some success. The approach should be to get into the communities. Maybe the communities could do more to contact those people through transport and other schemes just to get them on board.

Mr Buchanan: In your opening comments, David, you said that resources in rural areas need to be targeted correctly. Are you indicating that programmes have been delivered that have not been effective? If so, is there a requirement to look at a different approach to the planning and delivery of services in rural areas?

Mr McConaghy: No, it was not my intention to give the impression that the services that have been delivered under the TRPSI framework have not been effective. In the briefing paper, I say that we feel that they have been very effective but that, now that they have been running, we need to identify specific needs that exist in rural areas and to target towards them.

We are coming into a period when there will be significant budgetary restraints, and whatever remains in existence needs to be targeted at the areas that need them the most. The work of Rural Support, the MARA and the Farm Families Health Checks programme is excellent, and we congratulate the Department on bringing them into existence. However, they have reached the stage where they need to focus on specific issues that are persistent and have a specific rural slant so that we can allocate resources effectively now that belts are having to be tightened.

Mr Buchanan: What are the main issues in rural areas at the minute?

Mr McConaghy: The main issue that I find myself dealing with at the minute is disability. It was alluded to that illiteracy is a big issue, particularly with the amount of paperwork that is now required. There seems to be a fear of paperwork among farmers. They may have difficulty with literacy and do not feel comfortable doing it, but they are then terrified of being caught out by a mistake and having to face the consequences.

As well as that, we are dealing with transport. With an ageing population, fewer people are going to be driving in years ahead, so public transport in rural areas needs to be looked at and made more sustainable.

Mr Aston: One of the key things that we are finding is a centralisation of services. That leads on to the transport issue, but it is the fact that services are disappearing, whether they are schools, post offices or banks. All those things are moving to central points. I know that government do not have all the answers or all the say in what commercial businesses do, but that is making it more difficult for people in rural areas to access those services.

Mr Buchanan: One of the other big issues, which was touched on, is getting engagement from rural people, especially those who live in isolated areas. With the elderly in particular, it is so difficult to get them to engage, no matter what type of event or funding there is.

Ms Magill: Broadband is one of the problems that really come up when you talk about engagement and dealing with increasing bureaucracy. We have very good superfast broadband provision here in Northern Ireland, but we cannot access it in most areas. Sometimes it is because we do not have the right contact to the houses to carry it, but quite often we do not have any access at all. It is the same with mobile reception. So many parts of business banking are now online. Lots of forms are online, as is the animal and public health information system (APHIS). Everything is online or is getting that way. That means that, if you have no access to broadband or even a mobile network, you are disadvantaged and you are going to become more and more so as the need for it increases. It was not very long ago that the single farm payment form was supposed to be filled in online only. Thankfully, you can still use hard copy, which facilitates most people. It is a human right to be able to fill in a form whatever way you can. You really should not have to pay a form filler simply because you have no broadband access.

Mr Anderson: Thanks to everyone for coming along today and presenting to us. I will talk first about young people and schoolchildren. I think that you, Freda, talked about some of our young children sitting on a bus for quite a long time before they get to their classroom. We should all be really concerned about that, because young children getting up at a very early hour to get to school does not augur well for their education. Have you done any work with the education boards on that?

Ms Magill: We have attempted to.

Mr Anderson: That is what I am coming to. What feedback are you getting?

Ms Magill: Nothing positive. Sometimes people say, "We're looking into it". Sometimes it is negative, and people say, "What can you do?" I do not think that it is taken seriously enough.

Mr Anderson: You touched on more linkage between Departments. That is —

Ms Magill: That is an issue that really —

Mr Anderson: That is an issue that we need to look at. We all hear different things about kids going to school and how we should be doing everything we can to help them in that area. I think that more work needs to be done on that, and all the rural groups should be targeting it. I quite often meet the education board on a number of issues, and I bring forward certain things on getting the kids to school.

The other thing with young people is the lack of services for those whose parents both work. Have you found that there is a lack of playschool facilities in a lot of areas? Do parents have issues getting places for their children?

Mr Carmichael: Over the past few years, through a lot of community development work, there have been more preschool and after-school groups. I would not say that it totally covers rural Northern Ireland, but if you go out into a lot of rural areas, you will now more see more than there were before. It has left more freedom for people to apply for or access work outside the farm.

Ms Magill: There is a long way to go. It is only a drop in the ocean so far.

Mr Anderson: The reason I asked that question — the Chair probably knows where I am coming from — is that I am a rural dweller. Getting those funded places is sometimes really difficult. I was in a position where we had to lobby and lobby. It was only in recent months that we managed to get 10 funded places for our rural settlement. It is something that we have to keep working at. In the last five years, the particular community I am talking about managed to get a playschool and a youth group up and running through the education people. However, it takes a lot of hard work. I come back to the community and the new local action groups (LAGs) coming into place. We are going to have to encourage more people to work through the LAGs and the new rural development programme. In the last while, I have been encouraged by hearing that the meetings that are taking place in rural communities are well attended.

Mr Carmichael: Can I say something on that point? Having gone to one or two meetings and met people who are involved in projects, one of the things that I have seen is that it takes you to have a good voluntary driving force in a local area. In any of these areas that you are talking about where you have actually got places, some people will drive that on and actually have the knowledge and input to do that. A lot of places are getting it. The other night, I talked to someone who is involved in community building in a big way. He is a clergyman in his local community. They have built new premises at St Lurach's at the bottom of Maghera. As he said, a lot of it came down to him, it and had to go on even through his select vestry, but they had a massive programme of over £1 million.

One of the things that a lot of people felt the other night was that, when a lot of these groups started, they were started on a voluntary basis and were driven by volunteers. As groups developed, in a lot of cases they employed somebody on either a full-time or a part-time basis. What I have seen in community groups is that, when someone has come in and is employed, volunteers are sometimes inclined to back off a bit. I do not know whether there is agreement or disagreement about that. Community groups have come back to me and said that that happens. They then leave it to that person, whose contract may be up halfway through a project. Where is the group left? You talk about continuity, but if you want anything, you have to keep driving it.

Mr Anderson: I think that it has to be more voluntary. You have to have those one or two people to drive things, because — you are quite right, Jim — if others come in who are in a paid capacity, it can create difficulties. I have witnessed quite a bit of movement, I have to say, but that is not getting away from the rural poverty that is out there. As the Chairperson touched on, we can have rural poverty sitting alongside people who are better off. That is to be noted.

I will try to be brief, Chair. The other thing that I want to ask about is rural planning. You are smiling, Jim. In my field of work, I get a lot of lobbying to help the young sons, daughters and grandchildren of farmers to get planning applications passed with the one-in-10-year rule, as it is now. Do you think that that rule should be changed in any way to encourage more young rural dwellers? We have these young ones who are still looking and choose to live in rural areas even though there is a lack of services.

Mr Aston: Maybe I could respond to that, Sydney. When the one-in-10-year rule first came out, there was certainly an issue about bungalow blight in the countryside and all those sorts of things. A lot of farmers were accused of actually precipitating that. Unfortunately, we were going through very difficult times. You were maybe forced to sell off a site to try to keep income coming into the farm or to reduce debts. We recognised that we probably did not help ourselves with the proliferation of bungalows being built in the countryside. It did, however, go to the other extreme, whereby all planning stopped, which is why this sort of balance with a one-in-10-year rule came in if you could prove that you actually needed it for a farming business. At this stage, we probably feel that it is as good as it is going to get with that balance, because you have to tread that fine line. Certainly, there are issues where a farm could maybe accommodate one or two individuals. If that is the case, that is fine, and we should work on that. It is nice to be living near where you were born, but we recognise that you cannot do that across the piece. There has to be a balance in there somewhere. We feel that it is probably right where it is at the minute.

Mr Carmichael: If you look at it, you see that we also need consistency through the different planning areas for those who are applying. We have been involved with different people on PPS 21. There seems to be — I do not know how to state this — a difference of opinion about eligible land going from different areas. We have had cases quite recently. There needs to be consistency of approach so that the person applying actually knows what it is they are supposed to have and do.

Mr Anderson: I have a quick final question. Michael, I think that you touched on borewells: do we have a lot of borewells now? Is there a need for them? Is the Water Service not getting up to speed now for more and more people, or are we just talking about really isolated people?

Mr M Clarke: I think that it was in 1998 when I got involved in this through a neighbour, a woman who had no water. We fought it for 10 years and met different Ministers. DRD was funding the Water Service. At the start, there was £2,900 to supply water to that house, but, as it was isolated, it would take maybe £8,000. They relented and raised it to £5,000. However, when this woman got another estimate, it had gone up to £19,000. So, that was still no good for her. They then raised it to £10,000, but, when she got an estimate for getting water to her, it was £70,000. I remember sitting in the water board in Omagh one day and saying, "Look, this seems to be impossible. Why not put the £10,000 towards a borewell and let them look for their own water?". They did take that on board, thankfully.

At the minute, there are something like 47. They are in another programme that, I think, was rolled out again in May or was to be open in May. They did a survey on who had water and who did not. There were 1,200 houses that did not have water. When they put it out for people to apply, some people did not want it, and, in some places, when they tried to get it, the water was not there. However, I know that it has been an excellent programme. I am speaking personally, because this woman and about three or four others in the neighbourhood have got it. Planning came into that, too. If this woman had had two or three houses beside her, DRD would have funded each of those houses with £5,000 or whatever it was. That would have made bringing water to it viable. So, it was like a negative knock-on effect and you were just isolated.

Mr McMullan: Thanks for your presentation. Do you think that centralisation is hitting the rural areas much? You mentioned the councils and the community plans.

Ms Magill: Centralisation is the cause of an awful lot of the problems. However, to keep castigating centralisation and saying that it is a bad thing, which it is in some cases, will not get us anywhere. It is an economic necessity to some degree, and we have to face reality. However, facing reality should mean that we end up with a plus at both sides.

Centralisation can quite often mean that schools and hospitals are almost out of reach, but there are ways round that. Certainly, in health services, you can restructure the way that things are done. You can think about having local provision or almost triage. You can think about having a paramedic with a defibrillator on duty 24 hours a day in every part-time fire station rather than having to wait for an ambulance to come from maybe 40 miles away. You can have certain health provision in the community better than it is at the minute.

Secondary schooling is quite difficult. Some of the secondary schools are so big that children are not regarded as individuals but just pegs in a pegboard to fit the system rather than it being a case of the system trying to fit around them and their needs. Primary education is very important. Young children should not have to leave home very early and come back very late as a matter of course. It is exhausting. I am sure you can remember how tired your own children were when they came home from school. It is unsafe for a child to be sitting on a bus for ages. They could be hanging about at bus stops and other places by themselves. It is not to be recommended. So, in terms of education, certainly primary education must be looked at more closely.

Centralisation in other ways is almost inevitable. We have to go hand in hand with it and have provision to make up for the deficits to some degree locally where possible. We cannot deny that it is there, but we can make provision to compensate to some degree for the difficulties that it causes.

Mr Aston: When we talk about centralisation of services, you can differentiate between actual facilities and buildings and the provision of a service in an outreach-type approach. In our paper, we point towards the farm family health checks going out to livestock markets. Of the nearly 2,000 people that they have seen, over 1,000 were referred to their GP. They would not necessarily go to their GP, maybe because they do not have the time. However, involving it in their daily work activities — ie a livestock market, where they just call in — shows that type of thing can deliver. So, it is not necessarily about the building; it is about the service and the fact that we can maybe use other buildings for the provision of other services.

Mr McMullan: I was going to hit more on the council side of things, as they are big providers of services in the rural areas. The community plans are only voluntary. Should they not have been mandatory? We are going into the rural development programme, and councils do not even have their

community plans done. There is no time frame set for those to be done, and they are voluntary. That is working against the rural dweller.

I would like to have heard more about what we are doing with the information that was gathered in the MARA project. That information would be pivotal to driving better services in the rural area. I am a big advocate of the rural White Paper, but I am afraid that there are people who are not and who are only paying lip service to it. We see that time and time again. Those people need to be brought into line. You talk about section 75 on disability. It is glaringly obvious that the rural White Paper has not been adhered to. In a way, I think that sections of the rural communities sit back. It is not their fault; they have never been encouraged to come forward. Whilst those who make the biggest noise get the most attention sometimes, the rural dweller will sit back not wanting to make a fuss. We have to go in there. I would love to know where the information that was gleaned from the MARA project is going to go. It is going to sit on a shelf.

Mr Aston: I cannot comment on the MARA project, but maybe some of my colleagues will. On the whole issue of community involvement, Oliver, we are actively encouraging rural dwellers — not just farmers, because farmers are very busy people, but certainly their families — to get involved in what is going on in their communities through local action groups for the rural development programme, and PCSPs, which are looking at recruiting, on how you address rural crime in your area. It is going to be about actively engaging. The problem that we have is that, typically, the farmer has been too busy to get involved in all those things. They normally meet at times that do not suit farmers. That is an issue that we need to look at in trying to get more people involved. While you say that they are voluntary, they are there, and you might as well make the best use of them that you can through community planning or whatever. It is only by getting involved that we can do that.

Mr M Clarke: I think that the set-up of the new LAG is a good template if it is followed through. I served on the last LAG. After it was set up, there was a disconnect. There was no feedback from different communities. Now, they are proposing to meet all the LAG members at least twice a year and any time that they can lobby for certain things. What we need is more ideas from local communities.

It was touched on before that it is voluntary. Most parishes or rural areas have some form of community, be it a GAA club, a rugby club or a soccer club, that takes in a lot of the people. They are mostly voluntary, and they are the people who get things done. The voluntary people will do more than the people who are getting paid because their heart is in it. That is the way that we will reach the isolated people. If they cannot, I do not think that we can.

Mr McMullan: I totally agree with you, Michael. In that sense, these new councils are coming in at the right time to be able to latch onto that in the dispersed rural areas, where it would have cost councils to go out to deliver. They could help those communities to deliver for themselves. Instead of a community going to a council for a pittance of £100 of a grant, they could put money in and let those groups carry on delivering what they are, or help them to do a better job.

Mr M Clarke: Or those communities could maybe run a wee transport service if they got the funding.

Mr McMullan: It is also an absolute disgrace that we are held to ransom for profit by the global giants. We cannot get gas into the rural areas. Everywhere else can get gas, electric or oil, but we cannot get gas. We are at a disadvantage because of that, and that is because of the profits of global giants.

Mr Byrne: Apologies to the guests. I had to leave for Question Time and missed the thrust of the questioning. The inequality of opportunity was referred to earlier by David or Freda. We have to look to the future. What can be done, if anything, to provide something like apprenticeships or some sort of employment opportunities for young people in rural areas? That has not yet been tackled. Do you have any thoughts or ideas on that?

Mr McConaghy: This is probably just describing the problem, but if young people want to proceed in life and the professions, they have to go to the cities because that is where the action is. The only industry that seems to be rural-specific is agriculture. Tourism is also coming in now. As a starting point, we could start to play up the industries and future employers that will be part of the rural fabric, particularly agriculture and tourism, and start to put apprenticeships and opportunities for young people in those sectors of the economy and highlight their future potential. Young people will then get excited by that and join in. For law, medicine and engineering, the opportunities seem to exist in

urban areas, and I am not 100% sure how you would go about changing that for young people. It would take an awful lot of thought at all levels.

Mr Aston: I know that the Department for Employment and Learning have appointed what they call skills action groups across various sectors, and I have recently been appointed to a food and drink skills action group. They are trying to identify key sectors, so there are things like IT, medical care and those sorts of new products. They have identified groups and are looking at developing apprenticeships in the existing companies that operate there and how they meet those needs.

Hopefully, that will come through eventually. However, as David rightly pointed out, you have to get in at a very early stage and start to point people in certain directions. I mentioned DEL, but prior to that, it is about what the Department of Education and teachers are doing to promote the agrifood industry, in which we have a specific interest. We feel that they could do more, and it is important that there is a joined-up approach between those Departments to show where the job opportunities will lie in the future.

I know that we are focusing on the social inclusion side of things, but on the anti-poverty side, one of the key ways of bringing money into the economy is through profitable farming and a profitable agrifood industry. If we can create new jobs and have a vibrant agricultural economy, it will hopefully have a beneficial impact on poverty in rural areas. Unfortunately, farmers cannot keep money in their pockets. They circulate it.

Mr Byrne: On that point, is it possible to create some sort of apprenticeship scheme for would-be farm workers or helpers? Do they all have to go to CAFRE and do a level 2 or level 3 qualification? I mean practical apprenticeship-type work.

Mr Carmichael: There was chat about practical apprenticeship work at one stage in the past, which was instigated by CAFRE. Agricultural education is mostly driven through there. I had somebody on this morning, who said that a level 2 course is not necessarily delivered by CAFRE, but the further education colleges rarely do that type of thing. I suppose that more effort could be put into trying to get practical apprenticeships.

In our opinion, the technical aspects of farming go hand in hand. Some young farmers have come to us and said that they left school at 16 or 17 and do not have the education. A lot of the work is technical. We have to get back to the point of whether the industry can afford to pay those people. Agriculture is only one part of the Northern Ireland economy. Doctors and so on were mentioned, and a lot of people who are in what you might call the higher-paid professions cannot even get work in the Province.

I know that we are talking about the rural community here. It is one thing for the agricultural sector to directly employ people, but other sectors have moved out of rural areas.

Mr Milne: Sydney brought up the one-in-10-year rule earlier, and you will be aware of the single planning policy statement that is almost with us. Have you made any representations to the Department to change the rules within that? I am thinking about the 10-year rule for new dwellings clustered with a farmyard. There are problems with all that.

We have also talked about the rural communities and isolation. Some 75% or 80% of the rural population are non-farming rural dwellers. Have we made representations to the planning department to bring those people into the picture along with farmers? Farmers at least have an opportunity to ask for planning, but non-farming country dwellers do not. Have you made any representations to the Environment Minister?

Mr Carmichael: We have not. A few years ago, before planning policy came in, that subject was raised during a Question Time at Westminster we were at. As a farming organisation, we do not have any objections to non-farming people who are born in rural areas having the right to live there. In some cases, they are accessing sites through agricultural businesses, but there is nothing specifically for them.

Mr Milne: I appreciate that.

Mr Aston: As Jim rightly points out, we do not have a concern about people with a rural tie living in there. I know that there was an issue about people moving from cities, which was raised particularly

during the debate about national parks in the Mournes. The difficulty was in how you measure what a rural tie is. That is the problem. I know that clustering idea was an alternative to that. As I said earlier in response to Sydney, we recognise that there is a balance to be struck, and it is not about bungalow blight. You have to have the facilities. We are talking about isolation and a lack of services. If older people have to be looked after by their daughters or sons, they should be beside them. We recognise that, but it is about getting a balance.

Mr Milne: Would it not be advisable for both of you to make representations to the Minister on that while there is still an opportunity to do so?

Mr Aston: We will certainly look into that. We have no issue about the rural tie.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I see an issue, and maybe you agree or disagree with me. Quite a number of organisations work with rural dwellers. They all seem to do their own thing and there does not seem to be enough of a joined-up approach. I have noticed that for some time, and the more we get into the issue, the more I see it. What is your view on that?

Ms Magill: Most of the organisations you are referring to are probably manned, to a large extent, by volunteers. That puts them in a totally different category. The volunteers are fairly idealistic, want to achieve something and put their energy into it. They are not particularly part of a bigger system and are probably performing at their optimum level by doing exactly what they are doing at present. I take on board what you said. That could mean that lots of people are doing lots of different things in isolation and it is not joined up. There probably is room for more communication between voluntary groups. However, trying to have everything under one umbrella may do away with the goose that laid the golden egg and deter the original volunteers with their energy. So, you need to tread very carefully. I think possibly having joint meetings every so often and looking for common cause between such organisations would be very helpful, but I do not think that you want to seek to compromise their integrity to any great degree.

Mr Aston: In terms of local groups acting locally, yes, there is a definite role for volunteers, and these things will establish themselves. There is an issue about sustainability. Freda obviously does not want to pay tribute to her own committee, but some time ago, the UFU recognised that it was getting more and more people approaching it about wider rural, non-farming issues, such as education, roads, and all that type of thing. So, we ended up having to establish a separate committee to look at those wider rural issues. That is the committee that Freda chairs. To be fair to it, that committee has done heck of a lot of good work on things like education, food promotion, farm safety and a lot of the wider stuff. However, there is a need to try to coordinate that across the piece. But at a local level, yes, those things find their own level, effectively.

Mr Carmichael: You cannot take a top-down approach to all this, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to it. A lot of those groups come with a different focus and from a different base. Everybody talks about a bottom-up approach; that is what you want in local areas and that is the way forward. However, the difficulty is that a lot of the work that is done by these bodies comes back to funding or the lack of it: what pot of money and who can get what for what. They are competing, and there could be more communication between them. I have even seen it with youth groups and youth clubs that are competing for the same funding but for a different reason, if you take what I mean. There has to be room for all those groups to work, but there should be more communication about what they could do jointly.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): A couple of members mentioned PPS 21 and rural dwellers. It certainly is an issue. I have seen it on the ground in two separate families over this last few weeks, with some of the younger family members wanting to remain and build on the farm. It is not always practical to build beside or adjacent to existing buildings, and they have been turned down because the land adjacent to those buildings was too exposed. It is an issue, and it can be very frustrating for young people who want to remain on the farm.

Ms Magill: The other point to bear in mind is that, if you are having more and more family members centred in a cluster, you will have more and more toddlers running about and more old people who maybe cannot get out of the way of a freshly calved cow in time. Those young children will be in great jeopardy because of machinery, slurry-pit lagoons and all farming activities. So, while I can see that the concept might make sense in some ways, possibly a bit more distance would be an awful lot safer.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I think that that would be the view of many of us. Thank you very much again for your presentation.