

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Briefing for the ARD Committee

Background information on Rural Community Network

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 300 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Rural communities make up 35% of the population of Northern Ireland.

Overall Points

RCN welcomes the fact that DARD is running this programme as it puts a focus on issues of rural poverty and social isolation which are core elements of RCN's work. The programme has rolled out innovative projects delivered in partnership with rural stakeholders. Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) has sought innovative and creative ways to address issues which are ongoing in rural areas and has supported the community development infrastructure in rural areas. This has built upon the investment which DARD has made in rural community development over the years.

RCN believes that the challenge remains that other government departments are not taking rural poverty and social isolation into account to the degree that they should in their service delivery. There is an opportunity to support other Departments in their rural delivery through the rural White Paper Action plan and rural proofing agendas – TRPSI provides practical examples of what can be achieved when programs are flexible and delivered in partnership.

MARA has released previously unclaimed money which benefits the wider rural economy. Community development funding and the Rural Challenge Fund have secured resources to support and advise individuals and communities. They have supported and sustained communities through community development and have helped those seeking health services to access the right support in the right ways. Both the Assisted Rural Transport Scheme (ARTS) and the Contacting Elderly Rural Isolated Project (CERI) have reduced isolation and kept people well and in their own homes. The joined up nature of this work across departments and across sectors has been positive.

A better understanding of the extent and dynamics of rural poverty and rural deprivation is needed if it is to be tackled. Deprived rural households are often scattered throughout relatively affluent rural areas and therefore are harder to identify using the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM). NISRA need to re-consider how rural deprivation can be better captured in the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure, we will come back to this towards the end of the presentation.

Successes and Otherwise of TRPSI

RCN is of the view that TRPSI has been a success. Elements such as MARA and ARTS have been particularly successful. The numbers of people who have benefitted from these services is evidence of the need. The social return on investment for MARA in its first phase showed that for every £1 invested by DARD and PHA over £8 was returned. In the second phase MARA has met a challenging target of 14,000 visits to households.

The Assisted Rural Travel Scheme interim evaluation shows that from April 2012 to September 2013 over 278,000 ARTS supported journeys were undertaken and estimates that over 3,700 people benefitted from the scheme.

Farm Families Health checks, Rural Challenge Programme, Rural Support and Rural Borewells are all valuable projects that are meeting need in rural communities.

We believe the Department should consider how it can best use the data that TRPSI has generated. MARA has visited 14,000 households across rural NI – this is a huge data source that could provide valuable insights into rural poverty and deprivation. It could also be used to inform another round of TRPSI or Lifetime Opportunities or indeed many other government programmes.

Rural areas require a flexible approach to service delivery with a focus on outreach and partnership with grass roots organisations. TRPSI has demonstrated that this approach can work and can deliver concrete results. Other Departments need to learn from this approach so their services can be delivered in a way that better meets the needs of rural households.

Partnership Approach

The partnership approach adopted in delivering TRPSI has been a welcome feature. DARD has been very open to developing new partnerships and new approaches. A wide range of partner organisations have been involved in TRPSI and DARD have been particularly good at utilising the expertise and knowledge of rural stakeholder organisations. We believe it has been more challenging to building relationships across government departments. Whilst the TRPSI initiative is welcome there is a risk that other Departments will see rural poverty and social isolation as solely a DARD responsibility. The learning from the TRPSI programme has huge implications for the work of other Departments but there is a strong argument that they are not making the most of this learning.

Key elements for successor programmes

The impact of welfare reform in rural communities is unknown at this stage until the legislation is agreed and implemented but it could mean that households already targeted by MARA could benefit from a follow up visit.

As an organisation we know low pay is an issue in rural communities and coupled with rises in living costs has led to even tighter household incomes. Is there anything that a further TRPSI initiative could do to address this issue – beyond maximising the uptake of tax credits through a MARA type scheme?

Public spending will be even tighter in the next budget period – so any successor to TRPSI will have to be very well targeted to stand any chance of gaining Executive approval

Clearly any future TRPSI programme and initiatives under the Rural Development Programme Priority 6 should complement each other but not duplicate.

If MARA runs for a third time it may be harder to identify participants. At this stage many low income households in the most disadvantaged rural communities have received an enabler visit in the past three years. If the programme moves into more affluent rural areas to target poorer households in those areas they may be harder to identify. There is no easy solution to this problem but it may require greater effort to target those households.

Measurement and Usage of Rural Deprivation

Unlike urban areas which are socially segregated, deprivation in rural areas exists amongst relative affluence. This presents challenges for policy makers as area based interventions which can work well in urban areas where deprivation is spatially concentrated will not work as well in rural areas where poor people live alongside others who are relatively affluent. This issue was explored in depth at a Carnegie Challenge debate organised by RCN in the Long Gallery in November 2013.

The DSD Family Resources Survey Urban Rural report carried out in 2011/12¹ states that 24% of individuals living in rural areas were considered to be in relative poverty before housing costs in 2011. Individuals living in a household with a net disposable income below 60% of the UK median income are considered to be in relative poverty. The survey identified that 648,200 individuals lived in rural NI 155,568 of whom were considered to be in relative poverty.

By contrast, no rural wards fall within the top 10% of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland as defined by the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure. Even if examined at the smaller geography of census output area level only 15 rural output areas fall within the top 10% of the most deprived output areas.

So where the multiple deprivation measure is used to target government policy on deprivation, deprived households in rural areas are less likely to benefit. Simply, the NIMDM is too blunt an instrument. To address this we can either:

1. Change how Departments use the NIMDM and ensure that they think more carefully about how they target deprived rural households – MARA has done this by using NIMDM to target the most deprived rural wards and then augmenting that with local knowledge from grass roots community organisations.
2. Change how NIMDM captures rural deprivation.

This is not an exclusively NI issue and rural stakeholder groups in England, Scotland and Wales have also raised this issue. Analysis of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007 in England by Action for Communities in Rural England identified only 50 of the 3,200 most-deprived 10% of areas as being rural. ACRE has developed a significant piece of work to address this issue in England and to aid policy makers there see

<http://www.acre.org.uk/our-work/rural-evidence> . See also this report commissioned by the Welsh Local Government Association's Rural Forum, *Getting the Measure of Rural Deprivation in Wales* available at <http://www.ocsi.co.uk/news/wp-content/uploads/OCSI-GettingMeasureRuralDeprivationWales.pdf> .

At our Carnegie Challenge debate we heard from Trutz Haase who spoke about the methodology his team had developed to measure area based deprivation in the Republic of Ireland which we believe takes better account of rural deprivation. Their method recognises that the experience of deprivation in rural communities is profoundly influenced by location and the opportunities that people can or cannot access due to their location and mobility. They define this as “opportunity deprivation”. Their model includes indicators that quantify the demographic decline that opportunity deprivation leads to. The indicators they use are

¹ *Family Resources Survey Urban Rural Report Northern Ireland 2011-2012* p59, Published by DSDNI 29.04.14 available at http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/official_publication_draft_1112.pdf

the proportion of the dependent population (those over 65 and under 16) and the percentage of the adult population with low levels of educational attainment at small area level. These are used as proxies for rural deprivation in their model. We believe NISRA should consider how these issues can be addressed within the NIMDM.

NISRA is due to conduct a review of the NIMDM in the next few years. When NISRA refreshed the NIMDM in 2010 they produced a report *Recommendations for Future Research into Spatial Deprivation* based on consultations with stakeholders. The report recommended that further research should be undertaken into the identification of rural deprivation, and specifically the suitability of the indicators employed and geographical areas used. The ARD committee could scrutinise how NISRA plan to action this recommendation to ensure that any changes to the NIMDM can ensure rural deprivation is captured.

RCN would also recommend that NISRA re-issues guidance to policy makers on the use of NIMDM for the allocation of resources and its limitations in identifying deprived households in rural areas which are not spatially concentrated.

A better evidence base will inform DARD and other government Departments and should lead to more effective policy interventions. OFMDFM, DARD, DSD, DHSSPS, DE and DEL all have programmes and policies that aim to address issues of poverty and inequality. A better understanding of the dynamics of rural poverty should be of interest to all these departments and should inform rural proofing.