

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Briefing for the ARD Committee

Background information on the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)

RDC, the rural development organisation for Northern Ireland, provides a range of development, support, research, training and delivery services for individuals, farmers, farm families, groups, communities, social economy enterprises, public and private sector organisations.

RDC has managed and administered over £80 million in funding to over 7,000 rural projects during its 22 years of working in rural development. This has included, among other activities, support and help to people in rural areas to develop and maximise the use of community facilities, undertake village renewal and regeneration actions, create workspace, gain employment, sustain transport networks, build play parks, deliver training, protect their environment, promote good relations, access essential services and maintain their local shop.

RDC is presently managed by an 11 member Council comprised of representatives drawn from a wide range of rural interests. The Board is supported by an enthusiastic and passionate staff team and collectively they work to secure a vision of ***'a living, working, sustainable and shared countryside'***.

RDC have been involved in the development and delivery of the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme in a variety of ways, including;

- Contributing to the development of the original tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation Framework document
- Design and delivery of best practice workshops for the Rural Challenge programme
- Delivery of RYE, the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship project, funded by TRPSI
- Developing collaborative working by creating a referrals process linking the Farm Health Checks & Farm Safe Awareness programmes

General comments

RDC welcomes the fact that DARD has developed this programme, and commends the Department for doing so. The programme addresses many aspects of rural poverty and social isolation which are core elements of RDC's work, and have often been missed out in previous government programmes. Of particular importance has been that the programme recognises and highlights that there are specific factors of poverty and social isolation that can have a much greater impact as a direct consequence of rurality.

Our experience of the programme to date has shown that the following have developed as particular strengths of the approach;

- An understanding of the value of outreach & engagement in addressing these issues and a willingness to invest in this by proactively targeting actions and investment in locating those most in need, rather than simply inviting applications
- An appreciation of the “make do” culture among many rural dwellers, particularly those most at risk of poverty and/or social isolation, and a recognition that more needs to be done to change this
- An appreciation of the role of community organisations as partners in the delivery of services and programmes in rural areas and the value of adopting a partnership approach in general
- The benefits of using a flexible approach to delivering services in rural areas

RDC believe that TRPSI has been a success. Elements such as the Rural Challenge Fund and the RYE project have been extremely successful.

- Through 2 funding rounds, the Rural Challenge Fund has been very successful in developing a greater understanding of social isolation, funding projects that engage with the hardest to reach in society and its use of Best Practice awareness workshops for applicants in 13 locations across Northern Ireland has been an innovative and invaluable enhancement to this programme.
- Since 2008, the issues of youth unemployment and migration from rural areas have become evermore critical across the EU. The RYE project has engaged with over 800 young people from the most disadvantaged rural communities to help them consider entrepreneurship as a route into employment that would allow them to remain in a rural area and contribute to the sustainability of both the local community and economy.
- Farm Families Health checks, Rural Support and Rural Borewells are all valuable projects that are meeting need in rural communities. Through collaborative working over 900 farm families have now been referred from the Farm Families Health Checks on to the Farm Safety Awareness Programme (funded under Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme)

Considerations for future programmes

Building on the success of the programme to date we would be keen that young people, women and the wider rural community would be further engaged with, and that the learning derived from these programmes is not lost but rather built on.

We would wish to see an increasing recognition of the varied roles and contributions that women and young people within the farming household can play, particularly given the current low levels of farm household income.

It is also worth noting the current budgetary constraints experienced across government and any impact that this may have.

Measuring Deprivation in rural areas

RDC acknowledges that there are current issues with how rural deprivation is captured. While it is widely accepted that a lot of information is available through NINIS/NISRA statistics it is worth noting that its interpretation may not always be consistent. In addition it often does not adequately measure rural specific issues and based on the current Census, not all information is readily available at the appropriate scale.

OTHER Points For questions:

The use of the current MDM measure of deprivation to target support across varied programmes may not be the most appropriate indicator in all cases and may prove detrimental to rural communities in real need in some instances.

The use of a partnership approach in the current programme should be encouraged and developed in future programmes.

The role that social enterprise can play in addressing poverty & social isolation

Opportunities under the new Rural Development Programme