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Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Poverty and Social Inclusion:
Department of Agriculture and Rural
Development Officials

7 October 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Poverty and Social Inclusion: DARD Officials

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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:

Mr Paul Donnelly	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Pauline Keegan	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Colette McMaster	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr George Sampson	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome Pauline Keegan, Colette McMaster, Paul Donnelly and George Sampson. Committee members will have read your briefing papers. We recommend that you keep your briefing to about 10 minutes, please. Thank you very much.

Mrs Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to present to you as part of the Committee's review of anti-poverty and social isolation. Pauline Keegan and I will provide a joint briefing that will focus on the Department's tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework or TRPSI, as we will refer to it during the briefing. I will start with some opening remarks on the policy relating to TRPSI and will then hand over to Pauline, who will make opening remarks on the implementation of the framework. We will then be happy to take questions. With us is George Sampson, the acting policy lead for the TRPSI framework, and Paul Donnelly, the delivery lead for the framework. They will help in responding to the Committee's questions.

I will start with an overview of the policy context. The rural White Paper action plan is a building block in the Executive's Programme for Government and provides a framework for a more integrated approach by the Executive to address the challenges that are faced by rural communities. It sets out the Executive's vision of a fair and inclusive rural society where rural dwellers enjoy the same quality of life as all others in the region. It includes a wide range of actions that are aimed at supporting those who live in rural areas. One of those actions relates directly to targeting poverty and disadvantage in rural areas. The Programme for Government 2011-15 also includes a key commitment for DARD to

bring forward a £13 million package of measures in the three-year period 2012-13 to 2014-15 to tackle rural poverty and social isolation.

DARD's TRPSI framework is an important mechanism for delivering on the Programme for Government and the rural White Paper action plan commitments. It recognises that two issues that have a significant impact on the quality of life in rural areas of Northern Ireland are poverty and social isolation.

I will now outline briefly the key features of TRPSI. The TRPSI framework covers 2011-15. It builds on the work of DARD's rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, which operated during 2008 to 2011. TRPSI aims to provide interventions to help alleviate poverty and isolation. The framework focuses on three priority areas for intervention: access poverty; financial poverty; and social isolation. It specifies certain target groups at which eight measures are aimed, and those include, for example, the elderly, lone parents and carers. TRPSI measures also aim to help empower rural communities to help themselves.

TRPSI aims to complement and add value to existing government strategies that are aimed at tackling poverty and social isolation. It provides opportunities for a collaborative interdepartmental approach. A key element of the framework is about working in partnership with other Departments and organisations to develop an integrated approach to dealing with rural challenges.

TRPSI has been successful in helping to tackle poverty and social isolation in rural areas and has led to significant project outcomes. It has been effective in encouraging various Departments and organisations to work together to tackle the factors that contribute to rural poverty and social isolation. Developing a joined-up government approach has been one of the successes of TRPSI. That approach has delivered real practical benefits and has been well received in rural communities. The framework is also a useful mechanism for helping to promote new and innovative approaches to tackling poverty and social isolation. The farm families' health check project that was mentioned by the researcher is a good example of a new approach that brings a health service to farmers through a mobile health unit that operates at farmers' markets. That is helping to address an important social isolation issue. Pauline will say more about the range and success of individual projects that have been delivered.

Each programme that is funded under the framework has its own objectives and targets. The intention is that each programme will be evaluated at the end of the funding period to help inform future government interventions to target poverty and isolation. In addition, we plan to undertake an evaluation of the overall TRPSI framework during 2015. That framework evaluation will reflect and build on the outcome of the evaluations that have been carried out on each of the individual projects that have been funded.

The evaluation of the framework will assess whether TRPSI has delivered on its objectives and will identify the learning points. We intend to meet a range of stakeholders to help in assessing the impact that the initiatives had. That evaluation will be used to inform future government initiatives and will help to identify how future funding can be best targeted to achieve optimum value for money and help ensure that poverty and social isolation issues can be addressed effectively in rural areas, particularly among the most vulnerable. We also intend to engage other relevant Departments in the evaluation, and it is hoped that the learning points gained from TRPSI can be mainstreamed into future programmes that are delivered by Departments.

That is all that I want to say for now on the policy aspect. I will hand over to Pauline to talk about the implementation of TRPSI.

Mrs Pauline Keegan (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you, Colette. Mr Chairman and members, the practical delivery of the TRPSI framework has focused on developing interventions and actions that can help to alleviate rural poverty and isolation in a way that, we hope, complements and adds value to existing government strategies and, of course, has the aim of helping rural communities to help themselves.

Due to many different factors that contribute to poverty and isolation in any rural area, we think that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work. For that reason, we have, along with all our delivery partners that have been mentioned, developed a broad spectrum of actions in an attempt to address the wide range of poverty and isolation-related needs that exist within our rural communities.

I will outline a very brief overview of the actions being delivered, and I will try to relate those to the three key priority areas that Colette mentioned: access poverty; financial poverty; and social isolation. Those are the three within the framework that we have been targeting. I will also highlight some achievements and the impact of the schemes. Mark mentioned the maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA) programme. It is one of a number of our schemes that we feel is multifaceted in that it targets all three — financial poverty, access poverty and isolation — simultaneously.

MARA is being delivered in partnership, very successfully, with the Public Health Agency (PHA). Mark gave the figures and mentioned that over 12,000 households have been visited. That has generated 36,000 referrals for various grants, benefits and services. That is a big number. MARA has helped many rural households to claim benefits that they did not know they were entitled to. It has improved energy efficiency through the warm homes and boiler replacements schemes and has improved security through home safety checks. It has also resulted in over 700 householders registering with their local rural community transport providers, which, we hope, has helped to reduce isolation. It is a first-class scheme, and we have worked very well with the PHA. The scheme is proactive in tackling poverty and isolation. It is a public sector-led approach. It has literally involved knocking on doors and reaching out to people.

The rural challenge programme, also mentioned by Mark, has also focused on reaching out, but, in this case, the solutions to local poverty and isolation issues are proposed by the community and voluntary sector organisations. They can develop and implement a project to directly address the needs that they have identified as a priority. Under the current challenge programme, we have offered a small grant of up to £10,000 each to 44 organisations across the country. To date, those projects have helped over 5,000 individuals with serious issues such as financial capability, mental health, parenting skills and exclusion. Rural challenge is addressing access poverty, financial poverty and isolation.

Issues relating to poor mental health and well-being have become prevalent in rural areas, particularly within the farming community. While DARD has no responsibility for mental health as such, we do fund Rural Support to work with the farmers, their families and the wider rural community to try to assist and signpost them to services that can help with problems such as farm finance, paperwork, inheritance, succession and isolation. The Rural Support helpline has received over 1,200 calls, which are dealt with by a team of 30 volunteers.

Another complementary scheme is the farm families' health check programme, which provides a health screening, advice and referral service for farmers and the rural community. Again, we work with the PHA and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. Essentially, as has been said, that is a health checks van that visits marts and community venues. I suppose, in effect, it gets to touch the hardest-to-reach individuals who may be reluctant or, in the case of farmers, too busy to go to the GP. The scheme has had a very positive impact to date, with over 5,700 clients availing themselves of a check. Again, those are good figures. The health checks programme is primarily addressing an issue of access to services. That is a huge issue in the countryside.

Another access issue is one that most of us take for granted, and that is a wholesome water supply. Through our partnership with DRD, which holds the budget, we provided financial assistance towards the construction of 63 private borewells in areas where accessing the public water mains supply was not technically or financially feasible. We are working with a further 27 households with the intention of completing their borewells during late 2014 or early 2015.

We also have the assisted rural travel scheme, which was mentioned before. We have the connecting elderly rural isolated programme, which is being piloted in the Western Health and Social Care Trust region. That is expanding and enhancing the range of services available to vulnerable elderly residents in the west. It has a focus on health promotion and independent living, and has helped over 1,600 individuals.

We talked about MARA and referrals for home energy efficiency improvements. Mr Elliott talked about fuel poverty. Addressing fuel poverty in rural areas is a priority issue. We have been working with DSD and Power NI to reduce heating costs and are trying to create warmer, more comfortable homes for those in need of support. Through our funding, we have installed whole-house energy efficiency improvements in over 500 rural households, and almost 1,000 low-income rural families have benefited from loft and cavity insulation. That is having a direct impact on financial and fuel poverty, and it has been identified as a contributory factor to improving health and well-being.

While all the schemes funded have a distinct and clear focus on poverty and isolation, they have also been designed to complement strategies and policy tools in place within our Department, other Departments and government agencies.

Mark talked about the rural development programme (RDP). It is DARD's primary vehicle for creating dynamic and thriving rural areas, but we understand that the RDP does not provide the flexibility to do all that is required. For example, under TRPSI, we target rural youth and employability. We have the boost scheme, which has been adopted by the Department for Employment and Learning. We also have the rural youth entrepreneurship programme. In that, we have supported over 500 young people who have participated in workshops to explore their enterprise and entrepreneurial potential. There are a lot of schemes, and I do not want to keep you here all day going through them, so I am not going to finish all that I have in front of me you will be glad to hear.

It is a Programme for Government target and a £13 million package of measures. We work with a lot of other people, other Departments and partners. It is something that the Executive are supporting and have supported. We have, I think, been successful. We have reached out and supported a lot of people in need. Literally tens of thousands of people have benefited so far. As Mark said, £9.8 million of the £13 million package has been spent.

More could be done. I think you said that perhaps we have not reached every area. We are happy to hear about it if there are areas that we have not reached, but it is a wide range of measures that we have taken forward. We have taken the views of many organisations and are happy to do so again. There are different approaches and distinct needs, and that is why we have the different programmes that we are funding.

That was brief overview, Mr Chairman, but I hope that you found it informative. Perhaps the best way to get into some detail is with a question rather than a long presentation.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation. This review is about what has worked well and what has not. If you were to pick one thing, what would you say has been the success story of the programme?

Mrs Keegan: I will ask Paul to answer as well, but, from my point of view, it is the MARA programme. I know everybody talks about it, and maybe rightly so; people should talk about it. It has been successful in the way we worked with the PHA, and that is a really good thing. That is a very nice example of organisations working together. It has targeted the most vulnerable, if I can put it that way. As I said in the presentation, people have been able to claim benefits, and they did not even know there were benefits, and they certainly did not know that they were entitled to them. It is about going up through the farm gate, knocking on the door and saying, "Let us talk to you perhaps about what you might need". There are some very good case studies, so certainly MARA is one. I also like the health checks for farmers, because I think that perhaps sometimes they do not think enough about their health because of the job that they do. I hope that we have opened that up a little bit to them. Paul, you are the man in the lead. Do you have any more thoughts?

Mr Paul Donnelly (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I will just echo that a key success that may have initially been unexpected was the impact on the end beneficiary. Through the scheme, we have tried to keep the focus on end beneficiaries where possible, and I think that has been very positive. We receive positive feedback on a daily basis from people who have been helped. As Pauline alluded to, I think that the cross-departmental working, agency working, and community and voluntary sector working has proved very successful. We certainly do not know everything in DARD or even across government, so the good working that we have done across those sectors has definitely opened our eyes to the various issues and has had a greater impact. If we had tried to tackle some of those issues on our own, we would never have had the impact that we have had by working with other Departments, so I think that has probably been one of the key outcomes.

The Chairperson: On the other side, is there any part of the programme that you think has been a disappointment?

Mrs Keegan: I am trying to think. Has any programme not had the uptake that we would expect?

Mr Donnelly: The rural challenge programme was really in response to stakeholders. When we had our consultation, people said that the issues facing one rural area, maybe in east Antrim, are not the same as those in north Antrim or Tyrone. With the challenge programme, we tried to provide the

opportunity for groups to come forward and tell us what the issues were in their area, whether for youth or the elderly. This time around, we tried to look at the vulnerable groups in relation to section 75. Despite our best efforts, among the likes of lone parents and even ethnic minorities, we did not get the applications that we felt we would have, despite talking to the parent organisations. That is probably one area that, if we were to go again, we would try to do more in, because we do know that there are issues facing marginalised groups out there.

Mr McAleer: I noted that you said that there was a £13 million package of measures and that you work with other Departments. What are the main other Departments that you work with?

Mrs Keegan: There is a range: the PHA on MARA and health checks; DRD on rural transport; DSD on fuel poverty; DEL on the schemes for the youth; and DCAL on a small mental health programme. It is really right across the board. We have engaged with a lot of Departments.

Mr McAleer: It is probably difficult to put a figure on, but is there any figure showing what contribution they might be able to make? You say that the package at your end is £13 million. Is there any indication of some way that can be built upon?

Mr Donnelly: It is something that we have not looked at in detail at this time, but there is a significant impact. Take the assisted rural travel scheme, for example. Whilst DARD will pay for the journey that the person receives, DRD pays for the back costs, administration and things like that. We have DSD and the warm homes scheme. The way that scheme was designed was such that our top-up allowed a lot of rural dwellings to receive the full home heating insulation package, which, in some cases, was £5,000 or £6,000. There is quite significant input from other Departments. We have not totalled that up yet at this point, but we can certainly have a look at trying to do that. It would certainly increase the figures substantially.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Pauline and your team for the presentation. Apologies, I was out at Question Time, so I missed a bit of it. You talked about MARA and the good work that is going on there, but how do you engage with other Departments and agencies? Rural dwellers, by nature — I live in a rural community — are not very forthcoming with information. They are a proud sort of people. People living in an isolated area might just want to be left alone, but they are entitled to many benefits. To get those people to engage with you have you a database or do any other agencies have a database that you could tap into to find out how we can get those people what they are entitled to? A lot of them are entitled. I know of people. There was a case some years ago when I could have got grants, but that person did not want me to do that because he is such a proud person. He was entitled to a lot of things. I am sure there are lot of people like that.

Mrs Keegan: In one of the axis 1 schemes that we had, which targeted farmers directly, we had a mentoring scheme where we wanted to talk to farmers about their situation, issues of succession planning and everything else. That exact situation did come to light, because we were not able to mentor farmers very well because they essentially said that they did not want us to send people to them. They wanted to deal with their own people whom they knew and maybe their own accountants and friends. That was a difficult scheme to get going. We were essentially saying, "We are just here to try to offer a wee bit of help and advice", but that was a really hard one to do. It has got better because there is more of an understanding now, but at the beginning it was extremely difficult.

Mr Anderson: You say, Pauline, that it has got better but by doing what? How have you engaged those people?

Mrs Keegan: Some of the people who did engage with us then passed it on by word of mouth, saying, "These people are not too bad. They are not really going to try to find out about your personal business. They are not really interested in that". The mentors we had were maybe ex-farmers, ex-DARD staff or people who understood the constituency. It would not be an administrator like me going along and talking in that sort of way but people who really understood it. It is necessary to make sure that we get the right people, and maybe we have that in the MARA scheme, Paul, would you say?

Mr Donnelly: Yes. Just to elaborate on that, why MARA has been relatively successful is that the approach is slightly different. Across Northern Ireland, 13 community voluntary organisations deliver the programme in each area. They will recruit enablers, whose job is to identify the households. They do that by working with, for example, local community and voluntary groups, GPs or Church groups.

That has had a far greater impact in getting to the people you talked about, who do not normally come forward.

We had a challenging target of 12,000 households. We have completed, I think, 14,000 assessments because, as you will appreciate, people live in the same homes. That has created the new challenge for us to manage those outcomes. We have the Social Security Agency (SSA), DRD and various statutory partners on the scheme's steering group, and we are working closely with the SSA to identify the people, identify that they are eligible and get them to claim the benefit.

We have overcome the first two hurdles and are now focusing our resources on trying to make sure that those people claim. To apply, say, for an entitlement, the householder has to sign off. Even though the research has been done, they are told that they are entitled and have to sign off. That is where we are trying to focus the organisations now.

We talked earlier about learning. The first time we ran this scheme, there was one visit. Now there is a second visit to the household, like a follow-up, when we ask, "OK, how did you get on? Did you send those forms off? Why have you not completed them?" You are absolutely right: it takes that extra bit of work. That is probably why MARA has been successful. It is using grass-roots organisations to identify vulnerable households as opposed to government agencies like ourselves trying to do it.

Mr Anderson: With people who the individuals would have a lot of confidence in.

Mr Donnelly: Absolutely.

Mr Anderson: I think it is a matter of getting those people on board to maybe talk with you and to talk to them as well. I have experienced this, and it is not an easy task at times. For a start, people probably do not want help, although they are entitled to that help. Secondly, they are very private people sometimes, and they do not like questions being asked. I can understand that, but entitlements are entitlements, and people should be helped in any way. I certainly appreciate the work you are doing in that area.

Mr Byrne: Apologies to Pauline and the team for my absence: I was at Question Time. In the strategic context, the rural White Paper action plan is like a framework to work on. In relation to rural transport for isolated people, what does the Department propose about rural community transport partnerships? What can you do in relation to home help for those living in isolated areas? What about the meals on wheels? That was very important for people who lived on their own, and it did provide a service.

Mr Donnelly: We partly support DRD's assisted rural transport scheme, which is delivered by the rural community transport partnerships. That is a successful scheme that DARD is involved in and is working well. I do not know if you have a specific question, but the feedback would be quite strong on that. DARD puts about £600,000 a year into that initiative to provide free and concessionary travel for those with a SmartPass in rural areas.

As you will appreciate, it is to bring a bit of equity. Those living in urban areas have the SmartPass and have pretty regular transport, and, as you know, in rural areas, they do not. That scheme has been running for the past three years, and it is working very well.

In relation to the elderly, we have the Connecting Elderly Rural Isolated programme, which has been piloted in the Western Trust. It is working very well. Through DARD and extra funding, it is able to provide an enhanced service to those rural dwellers who may be more vulnerable and elderly. That is to provide that level of contact. They would have an initial assessment done, and, based on that, if they need somebody to come in to the house to help them, or if they need to go to an appointment, they can get assistance. That is a very successful scheme.

In relation to meals on wheels, we are not doing anything specific on that at the moment. There are issues around funding, and they have been brought to our attention. Some of the small challenge programme schemes that we fund in rural areas provide day centres and clubs for the elderly. As part of that, there may be some hot meals provided, but, to date, we have not been involved in the meals on wheels issue.

Mr Byrne: I appreciate the addressing of the issues. Does it require a local social economy group to initiate a project, or can DARD be more proactive in trying to initiate projects?

Mrs Keegan: It is a mixture of both. We have talked to stakeholders, and perhaps they have said to us, "This is something that should be done". We have our framework, which we talked about at the beginning, for financial poverty, access poverty and isolation. So, in the past couple of years, we have been trying to make sure that what we have done has fitted within that, but if people come to us and say that there is a need or a gap, we will try to look at it by ourselves or with the relevant Department.

If a social economy group or a voluntary and community sector group sees that there is a gap or a need, we would be very happy to look at that because, in a lot of ways, that is the best way. People should identify the needs from the bottom up in their own areas, rather than us trying to identify the needs in areas that we may not be totally au fait with. So, absolutely, that is very acceptable. We have a mixture of both at the moment within the programme. That is how it has come about.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much for your presentation. It is very encouraging to hear the results of your work. The last time that you were here, Pauline, it was quite a while ago, but I drew to your attention the lack of applications going to you for help. Obviously, somebody has done something somewhere.

Mrs Keegan: We took that on board.

Mr McCarthy: I am a bit concerned that you said that you have been able to discover so many people out there who need this assistance. All our offices are very busy on the same issue, and there are still people out there who have been missed out. Is it purely a rural scheme or do urban areas come into it at all?

Mrs Keegan: No, it is a specific rural programme. We see the isolation and loneliness and non-access to services as being a particularly rural issue. So, we have targeted the rural areas. You are right. It is disappointing that there are still people out there who need help, but that is always going to be the case. We are not saying that we are going to alleviate it with £13 million over a couple of years. We could not do that, and we would not want to do that. There are plenty of other agencies out there who are working away very successfully and were doing so before we started the programme, and I am sure that they will continue to do so. However, if we bring something to the table and work with others and try to enhance it a bit, it is probably as much as we can do. These are projects and interventions, rather than saying that at the end of it there will be much less poverty. That is a big thing to take on. That is a big issue.

Mr McCarthy: Finally, my ears pricked up when Paul mentioned meals on wheels. I serve on the Health Committee, and we have a former Health Minister here. He is not there now any more, but I am still worried about the meals on wheels. I spent a day going round the countryside with meals on wheels, as most of us have done. The service was enormous. It was huge. It was great. The people were delighted to see us coming, even if it was only for a chat, regardless of the meals. Unfortunately, the trusts have upped the criteria to qualify for meals on wheels. Thus, there is a vast reduction in the uptake. That certainly concerns me. I do not know how we overcome it. We can hopefully lobby the trusts so that the criteria will be reduced. You can help in that regard.

Mr McMullan: I apologise for not being in at the start of your presentation. I was in the Chamber. I congratulate you on putting that together today. It was very comprehensive. I read through it. I agree that some of the programmes that you have put in have raised issues that would not have come to the fore if you had not put them in, such as the MARA project. Getting that out there and having a dedicated worker dealing with that has, in a way, been a revelation in the rural areas. But some other Departments now will have to take up the baton, given the information that has been gathered, and go with that. We have quite a lot of information and have seen the number of visits that the MARA project has made. If that is not improved on or taken on board by other Departments, that information will sit on the shelf and not go any further. That is the sad thing. But congratulations on that.

We need to look at transport too because, in my area, we are out of one transport area and into another. That other area now does not have a quarter of the transport vehicles that we were used to having. The simple fact is that I do not think that they applied for them at the time. We are now sitting there when we could be using them all the time, and there are not enough of them to go round.

Lastly, we need to look at the review of public administration and the new council blocks that are being set up. As we know, councils will be the main providers for sports provision, and, with the new council blocks being set up, we need to make sure that the sports facilities are there. Disability is always the poor relation, so to speak, in the community when it comes to people getting what they are entitled to. It is difficult for them to get to any place that does sports for their ability. Most times, you have to travel 18, 19 or 20 miles. I fear that this will now go even further with the new amalgamation of councils, because I can see the problems already setting in. I ask you to keep that in mind.

On the MARA project, I certainly think that there needs to be a high level of discussion with other Departments to take the information that your project has brought to the fore to another place. I congratulate you on that.

The Chairperson: What issues do you see with the measuring of rural deprivation? For instance, I know of a man who receives food baskets from a local charity because it feels sorry for him. The same man does not know what he is worth. He chooses to live like that, if you understand me.

Mrs Keegan: Sorry, Chairman, what was your question?

The Chairperson: What issues do you see with measuring rural deprivation?

Mrs Keegan: That certainly is an issue. As I said, from our point of view, with this package of £13 million over a couple of years, we would not be able to make a huge difference. We would not be able to take it from a baseline to 3%, 4%, 5% or 10% up. Essentially, it is about interventions, support, help and working with other Departments, but there is an issue about having a baseline. There are lots and lots of strategies out there. Ours is only one. There are quite a few from OFMDFM, and other Departments have other strategies. It is not just our own. That is good and right. But there is an issue about measuring deprivation. We have Noble indices. Obviously, that is there but, from a rural perspective, people have their various views on that.

It is a difficult one, and that is why we have taken the approach of working with the Departments, the various stakeholder groups and the people out on the ground. We are trying to help the groups through the rural challenge fund by giving them the money so that they can work and identify the real needs. What you mentioned there probably does happen, and it is very difficult. But some sort of real baseline that means that you could really measure it, maybe not specifically for this programme but for other programmes, would be a good idea. It would be money well spent. I agree with you.

Mr Donnelly: Every current initiative will have some sort of criteria. I mean the MARA one, for example. That is why, in every super output area, we try to identify the 50 most vulnerable households. In all this, there is a factor that that person to whom you referred is isolated and vulnerable, depending on how much money they have. You still can be isolated and in poverty in some respects no matter how much money you have. So, it is about trying to find that balance as well.

Mrs McMaster: DARD has commissioned research that, we hope, will add to the evidence base to inform future rural policy initiatives and so on. We are seeking to build on the existing evidence base.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for letting me in, Chair. I think that I have raised the deprivation levels with you before. I, too, would like them looked at because, at present, the Noble indices discriminate against the rural dweller in quite a lot of instances. One example is childcare. It is like a postcode lottery. If you are in the wrong area, you do not get childcare, and that is you living in the middle of an isolated rural area. Quite a lot of the Noble indices go into the urban area, and, with the new council groupings set up now and the money withdrawn for urban regeneration, it only leaves the money for rural dwellers. I am worried in case councils hold back.

Mrs Keegan: Hidden pockets of deprivation.

Mr McMullan: Yes. Because of the withdrawal of the money for urban regeneration, they may want to balance their books. That is a worry, but I hope that the deprivation levels are looked at. In some areas that they have declared deprived areas, there is nobody in them..

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.