



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Poverty and Social Inclusion: Rural Support

21 October 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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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
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr Sam Campbell	Rural Support
Mr Jude McCann	Rural Support
Ms Marion McCracken	Rural Support

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I welcome Marion McCracken, chairperson; Jude McCann, development director; and Sam Campbell, board member. You are very welcome. You have up to 10 minutes to give your presentation and then we will have some questions.

Ms Marion McCracken (Rural Support): I have been chair of Rural Support for the past four years, but I am about to stand down from my position. The vice-chair is Sam, and our development director is Jude.

At the end of the day, I am a farmer's wife, not a high-powered business person. I have come from the wilds of Magilligan. I am a dairy farmer's wife. In fact, a sign of the times is that we are now the only dairy farmers left in the whole area. My husband says that years ago there used to be 14 or 15, but that is the way things have gone.

Rural Support was formed in 2002 in response to the foot-and-mouth crisis. I am sure that many farmers remember that. It was a very hard time for them, and we felt that there was a need to support farmers in the rural community. The charity was established in 2002. We have a small team, which is made up of three full-time staff and one part-time staff member. We also have 32 volunteers, who are the backbone of our organisation and have a wealth of experience. They come from many different backgrounds, but are mostly rural and ex-DARD. So, there is lots of experience there. We also have our board, which is made up of volunteers. There are 12 on the board, and they are from rural and industrial backgrounds, as well as DARD ex-employees. We have quite a wealth there. We have a

GP, and we had someone from the Samaritans but they have now been replaced by someone from Lifeline. So, we have input from them as well.

We provide a helpline service seven days a week from 8.00 am to 11.00 pm. It is managed by our trained volunteers in the evenings and over the weekends. Some of our successes include providing support to farmers, farm families and rural dwellers across the whole of Northern Ireland. We provide telephone support and home visits to people in times of crisis and distress. The efforts of the staff and volunteers have undoubtedly saved lives and supported many families through difficult times. One of the people we spoke to recently said that Rural Support saved their farm business. Actually, he said that it saved his marriage and his life.

When you hear some of the case studies from our volunteers, the extent of the work they do and the need out there, it really makes you feel very humble. We had an emergency fund back in March 2013 after the snow, and we felt that we managed that very well. Unfortunately, we were given only £50,000 and could have used a lot more. Over 700 applications came in. We started off with great intentions, and we had to cut back. In fact, some people at the end of it were getting only £100 because that was all that we could give them. Again, it was very humbling. Some of those people came back and thanked us for the difference it had made, even if it just paid one small bill or just to know that somebody had cared. It was great for us to feel that we were making a difference, and it was good PR for our organisation.

We feel that we give good value for money. Our core funds come from DARD, and we have to thank it for that. We hope for the continued support of DARD. It funds up to a maximum of 90% of our funding, which is £85,000.

To show the value for money, last year — 2013-14 — our volunteers worked about 5,000 hours. If you calculate that at £20 an hour, you are talking about £100,000. The board is made up of volunteers. They do not take anything from the organisation whatsoever. We have managed to lever in funds from other sources of approximately £25,000 in the past year.

Mr Jude McCann (Rural Support): I will just continue, if that is OK. I will give you an update on the helpline. It is the core of Rural Support, and then we have the outreach that our volunteers do. Over the past two years, calls to the helpline have more than doubled. This gives an indication of the pressure among the farming and rural communities. During the snowstorm of spring 2013, as Marion mentioned, our calls quadrupled, but they have remained high since then. We have had a good summer and a good autumn, but our calls have remained high in September into October.

We did a bit of research to look at the main issues coming through in the helpline. When you break them down, the highest percentage is on financial stress and debt issues among the farming and rural community. Other issues are CAP reform and the increase in isolation. There is a lot of loneliness in rural communities. As you know, farming can often be a lonely occupation.

About 60% of the calls to our helpline are followed up by volunteers who will provide support over the phone or go out to the farm and provide support in the home. We find that that works very well. In some ways, it is a befriending service. Having somebody from outside the family or community to talk to about some of the problems is very worthwhile.

When we looked at the issues, financial stress was one that we wanted to try to focus on. So, we approached the Public Health Agency (PHA) and got a small pot of money to do a six-month pilot around tackling financial stress. Through that, we are able to send out financial mentors with expertise in farming businesses and accounts to go through some accounts with farmers in their homes. That has been up and running for only a month. We have a six-month pilot but already we have seen a significant uptake of that service.

Mr Sam Campbell (Rural Support): Thank you for giving us this opportunity to make a presentation to the Committee. My day job is chief executive of an artificial insemination company. Ten thousand farmers own us and we are based at Templepatrick. Down South, we are known as Eurogene, and, again, we have 10,000 customers there. The sobering effect of that is that our company is in contact with 20,000 farmers all the time. It does not matter what region you are from or the geography, it is the same pressures.

We are specialists, and we make no apology for that. We are in a niche area, looking after agricultural and rural stress issues. It is a sobering thought that 300 people take their lives each year in Northern

Ireland. I am sure you have heard those figures from the Health Department. Half of those deaths are in rural areas.

Our job is not just to try and prevent what is very much a terminal end in some cases but to be more proactive and look at providing support and trying to minimise the stresses that are leading to mental health issues on our farms. We are different from the Samaritans or Lifeline in that we are specialists with a rural empathy. People from rural GP, DARD or bank backgrounds bring a specialism to help to solve specific pressures for farmers.

I do not need to tell you about the pressures that are on farmers, which can be up and down. For example, there is income volatility. Any of you who are in dairy, beef or sheep certainly know what that means. We can be at the highs of milk prices, at 30p, or the lows before we know it at well below break even. There are also the stresses that beef and sheep farmers have been under in the past while.

CAP policy is also a cause of stress — if we only knew where it was going in the longer term. Jude mentioned loneliness and isolation. Many farmers have no holidays, sick pay or pension scheme. The isolation is personal, professional and geographic.

I come from Derry, a wee townland near Dromara, County Down. Like Marion, I know that there were 17 active farms there in my father's day. Today, there is what I would call one and a half active farms. That just leads to isolation. There used to be a lot of shared labour but that has gone.

We talk about struggling in silence. Rural people very often struggle in silence. Some of them feel what I would call the shame of helplessness, even failure at times, and they do not share that. An interesting survey by the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) showed that one in three farmers does not tell anyone about their personal or professional problems. I think that is where a lot of the further stresses come from.

The average age of a farmer is 60 years plus. It is good to see youth coming back in and our colleges getting fuller again. Unfortunately, red tape is a big pressure; it is not just isolation and financial pressure. I could put myself into that camp very soon. I am not exactly computer literate, even though I have to be to an extent in business, but can you imagine filling everything in online these days? Can you imagine doing without cheque books in five years' time? Those are stresses for people who are just not used to that environment. We have to have empathy and a way forward for people in that situation. Technology changes, but some are being left behind. Other issues are animal and plant diseases. Tuberculosis (TB) is a scourge in certain parts of the country. If you are locked up with TB, that leads to financial stresses and cashflow problems. These are examples of areas where we come in. There is also market volatility.

With regard to two-tier farming, I am very happy about the Going for Growth strategy. It is great to see our industry being put on the map as a core business here, but I worry a little that we could evolve into two tiers. We will have those who are able to develop and become a major part of the food production chain. Equally, we will have a large number who will never have that scale and could be left behind. It is that medium and smaller-size farmer who could become even more isolated and vulnerable.

When I look at 28,000 farm businesses, I see that there are a maximum of 6,000 with one full-time employee. This means that 22,000 are only part-time and those people could very much become a two-tier structure.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Thank you very much for the presentation. I congratulate you on the work that you do with rural communities. You cover a number of organisations. Is maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA) involved with you?

Mr Jude McCann: We work alongside MARA but we are not over them yet.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): We need more of some of the work that is done, and it is welcome. DARD aims to work in partnership with stakeholders to deliver positive outcomes for people in rural communities. Does Rural Support feel that that has been achieved? Could more be done?

Mr S Campbell: As Marion said to the Chair, we very much value the support. While a lot of volunteer effort and skills go in, we all agree that it takes a certain amount of coordination. That is where our

executive team works morning, noon and night to pull this all together and, indeed, to liaise with all the other organisations, MARA and the PHA included. There needs to be more joined-up thinking.

I think that we get a good return from the core grant. Could we and DARD do better? Absolutely. If we could just get more joined-up thinking at times, we would all be the beneficiaries.

We should never underestimate the core of Rural Support, which is the volunteer. With no disrespect to our executive or board, the volunteers are those who make it. It is the 31 people on the ground who attend training courses once or twice a month in a range of rural subjects. They were brought together originally for crisis management. Foot and mouth was a crisis, as were the weather problems in north Antrim and the Dromara hills a couple of springs ago. We have turned more proactive now. It is not just about reacting to crises and having a team of skilled volunteers who can deal with a crisis; it is more about the day-to-day crises that are real for many individual stakeholders in the rural community. At the end of the day, that is where we have to put the funding, the credit and the focus to develop a team of people who are prepared to put in their time for free. They need a bit of training and coordinating, but that is what we could do better.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I declare an interest in that I have been a farmer all my life, so I know something about the difficulties. I well remember my father milking cows by hand in a wee six-cow byre, which is going back a long time.

I feel that there is a culture of self-reliance, especially among older people. People are too proud to ask for help. How can you see that being addressed? It is very difficult to address that.

Ms McCracken: It is extremely difficult to address that. I do not know how you break down that barrier. You just have to keep plugging away and trying to get there. It is about pride.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Yes, I think so.

Ms McCracken: They do not want to admit that they are struggling. As Sam said, this new digital age is scary. I know people in my area who are very isolated. We have one road going through Magilligan and everybody lives down lanes. I live down a mile-long lane myself, so you do not see anybody.

When I got married and moved there, I remember seeing a yard full of people — meal men — usually looking for money, but at least they were there. It was somebody to talk to. Now, you see nobody. Everything is direct debit and online. Some older farmers have probably never even turned on a computer. There was a scheme a few years ago about how to use a computer, but I do not know how good that was. My husband keeps saying that he has an European Computer Driving Licence (EDCL), but he can just about turn the computer on and does not know how to use it.

Mr Jude McCann: We are seeing a bit of a cultural change. Rural Support promotes its services actively. The fact that the number of calls to the helpline has doubled indicates that there is stress and pressure. It also indicates that people are seeking help.

The more we are out promoting our services, talking to people at marts and agricultural shows and having those face-to-face conversations, the more we are starting to break that barrier down. Yes, there is a lot of pride when you talk about mental health or financial issues but we are seeing a small shift there, which is reassuring.

The majority of calls to the helpline are from men. Very few other helpline organisations are getting that response from men, so we are reassured by the fact that people are coming forward to seek help.

Mr S Campbell: I suppose that is what our strapline is all about: listening, guiding, and connecting. We are not saying that we are able to do everything ourselves, but we are a listening ear, and I suppose that the best thing is that we have two ears and one mouth, as they say. Very often, we need to use them in that proportion. That is what it is all about. It is about listening and getting the signals on what needs to be done. Then, obviously, it is about guiding and connecting people to a number of other organisations as well.

I think that communication is very important because we are talking about that age group. We are talking about the people who are isolated and who will not all be e-literate. We just have to be very careful that we do not get too modern for our own good.

Ms McCracken: We find that we get the men ringing on Monday mornings after the weekend and after the family have left and the wife has gone to work or whatever. It is when they have been on their own for a few hours and realise how isolated and depressed they are.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): They probably do not even want to annoy their wives. That is why they ring when the wives are away.

Mr Anderson: Thank you for the presentation. The Chair touched on some of the points I want to raise. Last week, I raised the issue of how to get farmers to engage. Proud people that they are, they do not like to divulge the difficult circumstances they may find themselves in. It is only when they are really in difficulty, in some cases when it may be too late for you people to do things, that they do so. In another forum, I faced issues like this and asked questions about them, and I do not know whether we are getting on top of it to try to get these people to come forward. I know that you have your helpline and, obviously, your figures are doubling from what you had previously. I take it that it works from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm seven days a week.

Mr Jude McCann: It is from 8.00 am to 11.00 pm, seven days a week, every day of the year.

Mr Anderson: When you take a call, what feedback do you get? You really get engagement with those people at the particular moment when they are on a downer and phone you, but how do you follow that up?

Ms McCracken: Our figures show that 60% of our calls are followed up by a volunteer either going out and engaging or ringing back. Certainly, a percentage of the calls that we signpost to other organisations are just people asking for help.

Mr Jude McCann: Some calls are simply people asking for information, which can be dealt with over the phone or knowing where to go to access help. As Marion says, we would refer 60% of the calls to a volunteer. That is one of the key strengths of Rural Support, because our volunteers are all from a farming and rural background, and they will visit people in their own home and develop that bit of a relationship and that bit of trust. Sometimes, it is only after you have had those face-to-face conversations that other issues start to emerge. People may phone up about form-filling, but the reality is that there may be problems with the bank, DARD, or there may be marriage problems. Very often, that does not come through in an initial telephone conversation.

Mr Anderson: Jude, you are touching on face-to-face contact. The initial phone call may give you a good lead —

Mr Jude McCann: Yes, it is a connection.

Mr Anderson: It is to get them to that point. It is what I would call early intervention or getting in there before it gets too deep.

Mr Jude McCann: Exactly, and some of our volunteers will provide support. Sometimes it can be over weeks and months and, in a couple of cases, it was over years, where there were long-drawn out legal disputes over land. There were serious family pressures, where people just needed somebody to talk to once a month or once a fortnight just to sound off and say, "This is what we are thinking of doing. Can you provide a bit of support?". In some cases, our volunteers will go to the bank with the individual to speak to the bank manager because perhaps that relationship has broken down. It is that one-to-one support that is very beneficial.

Ms McCracken: The single farm payment is always a big issue for farmers who, for some reason or another, have been blocked. We have people who can help by going to the bank and saying the money will be coming. It may not come this week, but it is definitely there. Sometimes, banks are not our biggest allies.

Mr Anderson: You engage with the farmer and the rural dweller if it is a financial problem. Obviously, you have roadshows or different things to engage the people themselves. How much engagement do you have with banks or financial institutions to get them to realise the difficulties that farmers are in at any specific time? There may be a bit of work to do there. Do you do that work?

Mr S Campbell: We do a lot of work on that. It is never-ending because of the different pressures that come along. It is an ever-changing environment. I use the example of milk and beef prices. Any of you who are in farming will realise that milk prices have gone very rapidly from 35p six or eight months ago to 20p now. Margins on beef and sheep have been well covered. They would probably be on the negative side without the single farm payment. In fact, in 90% of farms, they are negative without the support of the single farm payment. Pressures can change and vary. The volatility of pricing and all of that puts them under pressure.

We are currently doing a programme that is targeted specifically at financial stress in the rural environment. We are fortunate. We play it both ways. We have a number of retired agricultural bank managers. We have people who used to wear another cap. That brings a lot of experience. All too often, we see people burying their heads in the sand. If you bury your head in the sand, a small problem can become a big problem. Often, if you can just get someone to talk about it, counsel them and get them to share, then there is a solution. Unfortunately, too many people allow it to go on, and it becomes unsolvable, affecting their health and mental state. Unfortunately, all too often, we see it getting too far; that is the problem.

Mr Anderson: There has to be early intervention. Do you engage or have any discussions with other rural organisations such as the Rural Development Council (RDC) and the Rural Community Network (RCN)?

Mr Jude McCann: We meet the RDC and the RCN from time to time. They often signpost our services to people who contact them. It is very important that we are aware of who is providing what service. They do excellent work in highlighting some of the policy issues that we do not have the resources to put behind. There is a good working relationship.

Mr S Campbell: Equally, we have the volunteer team that they do not have. That is how the organisations have to interface with each other.

Mr Anderson: I appreciate that; thank you very much. I wish you well in the work that you do.

Mr McMullan: Thanks for the presentation. You mentioned foot-and-mouth disease. I agree with you on that particular one, but no help ever came into the glens. I was one farmer who lost all his stock.

Mr S Campbell: Foot-and-mouth disease can be used as an example of crisis management that was not best handled, although I will give the DARD veterinary division etc credit for its handling of it at the time. It was out of that stress that this organisation was born. Unfortunately, we were not there at the time of the foot-and-mouth crisis to be the listening ear that we are today. However, when everyone sat down at the end of the foot-and-mouth crisis, the rural support network was formed as a listening ear. That is one thing that DARD did not provide throughout that crisis. People were left very much in fear. They did not know what was happening, particularly those in areas that were hot spots of foot-and-mouth disease.

Something had to be done about that. All the organisations — the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA), DARD etc — got together at the end of the foot-and-mouth crisis and said, "This cannot be allowed to happen again. People cannot be left isolated. They cannot be left not knowing what is happening." That is why the organisation was formed, Oliver, but it was too late for that particular crisis. It was a reaction to that crisis. The closest that we have had to a crisis since then was the snow event a couple of springs ago. While that affected only certain areas, it was very serious for those who were stuck in the middle of it.

Ms McCracken: Some people have the misconception that Rural Support has money. We do not have money to provide. The period last year was the only time that we were given a pot of money, some of which I know went to the glens. People ring up thinking that we have money to provide, but we cannot give them money that we do not have. We can signpost them to where they can get grants, but we do not have the money. We give them mental support.

Mr S Campbell: We are a counselling organisation, basically.

Mr Elliott: Thanks for the presentation, and apologies that I missed the start of it. It is interesting, Sam, that you talk about a two-tier farming sector, particularly in the Going for Growth project. Surely there has always been a multi-tier farming sector. Nobody has ever been on an equal footing, and

there is quite a range. Some people have 200 or 300 milk cows, and other people have 25 or 30 milk cows. There are people with 2,000 beef cattle, and people with 20 beef cattle. It is not always the smaller farmers who are in the most difficulty. Quite often, it is the bigger farmers.

Pressures are a reflection of today's society. No matter what business you are in, there are increased pressures, and farming is no different. The slight difference with farming is that people are working in isolation more often. That is one difference between farming and other businesses.

I have referred people to Rural Support. What type of advice do you give to the people who come to you? Is it mainly signposting, or do you give them more practical help to access the information?

Mr S Campbell: It starts with listening. First, you have to be a good listener, and that is the first thing about each of our 31 volunteers. Secondly, you have to have empathy. Each volunteer understands rural issues. Other organisations, such as Samaritans or Lifeline, understand more generic or broad-based mental health issues, but we know the drivers and causative factors of stress on the rural side. As Jude said, the problem that the guy or the lady starts to talk about is very often not the root of the evil. You have to get people to open up and talk. We provide a listening ear.

Unfortunately, we are not funded to give grants. We are funded to have a team of trained counsellors. If you can get proper counselling, you start to get to the root of the real issues. At that stage, there may be a referral to the public health side or to a financial institution. It may be that we are a mediator in a certain event. Jude, maybe you would like to give a wee bit more background on the range of issues. Financial stress is number one, but there are others.

Mr Jude McCann: Absolutely. As I am sure that you can appreciate, every call that comes through is unique. Everybody has different circumstances. Finance is the biggest issue at the moment. Although all our volunteers are from farming or rural backgrounds, they have different sets of skills. Some are farmers who are still farming, and some are retired farmers. They can provide the technical, practical support that is often the hook that enables you to start to have an easier conversation. We have other volunteers who are trained counsellors, who can provide emotional support. Depending on the issue, we will try to identify the volunteer with the most appropriate expertise to follow it up.

You talk about the pressure on different types of farmers. Recently, we had a call from a farmer who had six cows. A water bill had come in, and he was under a lot of stress. He was concerned that he was going to have to sell one cow to pay the water bill. Other farmers get in contact who are £300,000 in debt to a bank. Everybody deals with stress differently. Those individuals had very different rates of debt, but they both needed support and help. We try to match the most appropriate support to the individual.

Mr Milne: Thanks for your presentation. You are based in Cookstown, but how far do you reach? You have 31 voluntary workers, with two full-time staff and one part-time staff member. That does not seem like a lot for the Six Counties.

Mr Jude McCann: Our volunteers are from across Northern Ireland, and our calls come in from across Northern Ireland. We get fewer calls from west Tyrone and Fermanagh. We have focused some of our resources on rural isolation, because we know that the issues are there as well. Interestingly, with the new financial stress project that we launched a month ago, the majority of our calls come in from Armagh. Traditionally, we did not get a lot of calls from Armagh. Word of mouth is also a big factor. When one or two individuals access a service and get something beneficial, talking to a neighbour is one way to spread the word. We recently had one client from Rathlin Island, so we are stretching across all Northern Ireland.

Ms McCracken: I have a pie chart that shows that, in 2013, most calls come from County Down, and, as Jude said, our fewest calls came from County Armagh. However, there is a range.

Mr Jude McCann: The year 2013 was an exception because of the snow and fodder crisis. The areas worst hit by the snow were County Antrim and County Down, so the volume of calls from those areas increased significantly.

Mr S Campbell: We aim to provide as broad a spectrum of skills as possible, covering every community in the North. Our problem is that 31 volunteers is not good enough. We were in the low 20s a year ago and managed to get that up to 31. We would love to have 50 volunteers. When we make an appeal, it is not always for money. Money alone does not make this organisation. The grant

that we receive from DARD is invaluable in being the fulcrum for giving us an organisation that can coordinate.

We are always on the lookout for volunteers. One of our big recruitment drives is always to get a broader base of volunteers for wider community representation and with a wider range of skills. The more people we have on the ground, the more help we can provide.

Mr Milne: Do you have a feedback system for forwarding to DARD the information that you gather about problems among farming communities to give the Department or whomever else a better understanding of those problems? Is it farmgate prices that we talked about earlier, which put people under stress? Is feedback going to the relevant authorities for them to get a better understanding?

Ms McCracken: A DARD official meets us regularly, and we explain the issues. I have a chart showing the types of problems. The largest issue is finances, but there are also farming-specific issues such as inheritance, succession, family relationships and health. We provide feedback to DARD.

Mr Jude McCann: We meet a DARD official every two months, and we have a good working relationship. If we identify a bottleneck or see an increase in calls, we provide feedback to DARD. Recently, a lot of calls came in about entitlements, which placed a huge pressure on people and caused a lot of concern. We give feedback to DARD if we notice a peak in calls on a particular issue, and we ask what we can do to alleviate that. During that time, a team of our volunteers went to Stormont to meet DARD officials to talk through the entitlement issues so that we had as much information as possible to help callers.

Mr Milne: That is brilliant.

Ms McCracken: We also went to the DARD Direct offices and did training among staff.

Mr Milne: Very good.

Mr S Campbell: It is also a case of word of mouth. I can speak only for the organisation that I work with up here in the North: AI Services. We have 10,000 customers, but we do not waste a stamp, as they say, sending out a bill. Hopefully, in that bill, there will be information about the help and support that we can offer. Like every other organisation, we have people who cannot pay their bills or have stresses. It is about word of mouth or getting direct focus contact to as wide an audience as we can.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I commend you for what you do. You have 31 people who are prepared to give up their time, and that is a big gift to the local community. Quite a number of organisations work with the rural community and are probably somewhat fractured. Do you see any benefit in organising yourselves to work together? It seems to me that it would be beneficial.

Mr S Campbell: I see that as a logical progression. I am sure that all those organisations do good work in their own right, but there should never be overlap or, worse, areas that fall between two stools. That is where the uniqueness of Rural Support comes in. Many organisations have helplines or contact lines, but very few have the trained personnel on the ground. I think that that totally differentiates us from others: the 31 volunteers and their range of skills. Maybe I am going over the top, but I believe that the listening element is vital. Helplines are two a penny, but someone who can listen and get to the root of a problem is really valuable. It is counselling, a follow-up or just being friendly — whatever words you want to use. Those things de-stress people or get them in the right channel. I think that that wee bit makes us very different. If I were looking at all the pools of money that come in to rural development and other support organisations, I would like there to be more to encourage voluntary uptake. Sometimes, our industry has to help itself, but it takes pump-priming to allow us to coordinate that, and we then have to get out there and help ourselves. You can do that only with more volunteers and a bigger team. We believe that pump-priming is the key to that.

Mr Poots: A lot of people are under the misconception that farming is a healthy lifestyle. It can be, but people are also out working in very damp weather conditions and in sunshine when they expose themselves to too much sun. There are also all the issues that you covered: stress, isolation, loneliness and mental health issues. How closely are you working with the Public Health Agency to get those messages across? Is there a further opportunity to develop that? Traditionally, farmers are a hard-to-reach group. Men do not talk much about health, and they talk about mental health even

less. How closely are you working with the Public Health Agency, and what more can be done to ensure that those messages are getting out?

Mr S Campbell: As an organisation, we see the issues and the drivers. Very often, the solution is to get better cooperation between the sectors. I would even say that DARD and the Department of Health should work together more closely at that level and realise that there is a common problem and a common area that needs a solution.

The pilot scheme that we are working on is funded by the PHA. It is very interesting, because it is the first time that we have really had cross-departmental support. We believe that the pilot has an awful lot to offer. Basically, it is the Public Health Agency recognising that the niche area that we work in — agriculture and rural stress — can lead to health issues. We should try to prevent that at an earlier stage rather than wait until someone has a breakdown or worse. That is the answer. That is why the pilot scheme, which started with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, has now been widened out into all the trusts. It is an interesting six-month pilot, and I believe that it is a great template or model for working in the future.

Mr McMullan: What are you doing with the information that MARA has gathered?

Mr S Campbell: We are not MARA.

Mr McMullan: I know that.

Mr S Campbell: Information gathered by any organisation working in this sector should be much more cross —

Mr McMullan: I am talking about the information gathered specifically in rural areas by MARA. Money was set aside for it. What can you do with that information? What would you propose to do with it?

Mr Jude McCann: One aspect of MARA was to maximise access to benefits for rural areas. The fact that rural poverty is often hidden is a big issue. In a lot of cases, it goes under the statistics and under the radar. We refer to MARA people who contact us wondering whether they are entitled to some benefits. Very often, a landowner or farm owner thinks that, because they have a bit of land as an asset, they are not entitled to anything. That was one of the key values of the MARA project: to be able to sit down and go through what benefit entitlements they might have. I suppose that the information that is gathered from MARA can be used to pinpoint resources, so that, if we identify particular problems in different areas, we can use it. Likewise, MARA can refer people to us. If they provide support to an individual whom they are concerned about and who may be suffering from stress or depression, they have Rural Support leaflets, and they will pass on our contact number.

Mr McMullan: All you are talking about is referrals. What do we do with the information that is gathered up after 18 months? I was waiting for you to tell me that all the relevant agencies should come together to disseminate that information to see what programme we can put in place. We have a six-month pilot scheme, which is very good, but information from MARA is part of that. I am a bit disappointed that we have not heard that agencies should be coming together. That is vital, and we do not have it nailed yet. What happens next?

Mr S Campbell: Do you want to mention the network that you hope to evolve?

Mr Jude McCann: In regards to —

Mr S Campbell: As far as I am aware, a network will be put together for the helplines. Jude is our full-time executive and knows more about it than me. That is a step in the right direction and will bring all the helplines into one place.

There is also our information database, which is tremendous. Every call is analysed and placed into a certain box. We record whether it is about financial issues or whatever, what follow-up it has had and whether there has been counsellor follow-up or one-to-one listening follow-up. That makes us unique. Anything that would marry all those information databases together has to be the way forward.

Mr McMullan: We have not decided the way forward. I understand what you said, but I have heard that time and time again.

What is the next step for rural dwellers? You have put a programme together, gathered a large amount of information and visited many people. That information is sitting there; it is pristine and ready to go. The powers that be cannot ignore it. You should look at that information and run with it instead of running with other programmes. You are overlapping.

Mr S Campbell: I agree, and I suppose that that is the bit that we feel makes us different.

I would love to have 60 properly trained-up volunteers instead of 30. Training volunteers is a big element of our coordination. There is no point in having information if you do not have someone to follow it up who is listening and going out there to solve the issues. Too many organisations are registering the problems, but not enough are trying to solve them. We need more volunteers to follow up on the content of the databases. It is all right knowing what the issues are, but it is all about solving the issues. That is where we need to get to.

Ms McCracken: Oliver, you want the information to be gathered together. We provide feedback to DARD, so it has that information. The Department needs to react and put something in place.

Mr Jude McCann: I have no doubt that the MARA project is gathering a lot of information that should be used to influence policy and make changes. In Rural Support, we are not lobbyists or policymakers. We are delivering a service. Groups such as the RCN are better placed to use that information. It has policy officers who can influence government decision-making. I have no doubt that there is good and valuable information there, but, as Sam said, we are not MARA, and that is not our information.

Mr S Campbell: Our £85,000 allows us to have a certain amount of coordination and to train a certain number of volunteers. We would love to do more.

Mr Byrne: Apologies: I had to leave the meeting. You may have been asked the question that I want to ask. You had a three-year contract with DARD that ran out in March 2014. I see that you have been asked to carry out a review of the service to assist future plans and activities. Is that happening? What was the outcome of that, and what are the chances of getting a further contract?

Mr Jude McCann: We did an evaluation at the end of the three-year programme and designed another three-year strategic document. Unfortunately, with the current funding environment, we got only a six-month interim fund. We are now into a second six-month interim fund, as we have been told that the 2015-16 Budget has not yet been agreed. So we are operating on a six-month basis, which is not ideal for any organisation or charity. We have good staff whom we do not want to lose. We are in an unfortunate situation. Ideally, we would like to have another three-year rolling programme.

Mr Byrne: Did the review of the services come up with any positives for you? Is DARD impressed with you?

Mr S Campbell: All the feedback and evaluations that we have had from DARD have been positive. It agrees that we tick all the boxes. We believe that, this time, it will not be a so-called grant to a charitable organisation but will more than likely be a tender process, which we welcome. We believe that that will weed out and stop a lot of the overlaps. It is all about value for money. If it is a tender process, and we can put our case and track record to DARD, we believe that we have a lot to offer.

Mr Buchanan: You said that you have gathered all the information and, therefore, have knowledge of the real pressing problems in the rural community. You mentioned feeding that back to DARD. As an organisation, do you make any recommendations to DARD about what should be done that could help to solve the problems that you are faced with daily? It is all right feeding in information, but since you are dealing with it hands-on and have all that information, you are in a position to put forward recommendations about what you see as a way forward that could resolve some of the problems. Do you do that?

Mr S Campbell: That is an excellent point. We are very fortunate. We recruited Jude three years ago. He comes from an academic background and has looked at all the social issues. One of his skills was to look at models in countries such as New Zealand, Australia and down South. We all have common problems and issues.

Jude has put together a number of strategic papers and has forwarded those to DARD. I dare say that those are the only papers that have been forwarded to DARD on the issues and the solutions that we see. I do not think that any other organisation has put the same strategy forward. We hope that DARD takes note of that.

Jude, do you want to elaborate on that?

Mr Jude McCann: I will give you my background. I lived and worked in New Zealand for a number of years looking at the removal of subsidies from agriculture and the social impacts that that had on farmers and farm families. I was able to look at models that operate in other places to make recommendations for Rural Support.

One of the recommendations that we made and have started to introduce is for the organisation to be much more proactive. Rather than waiting for a BSE or foot-and-mouth-disease outbreak, we feel that we should be able to be in there earlier, trying to help people before those problems becomes crises. I want us to be in the position that we have the resources to make policy recommendations, and we would certainly like to do more of that in the future. We provided a substantial research report to DARD that included some recommendations.

Mr Buchanan: Do you ever get any response from DARD on the information that you feed in?

Mr S Campbell: We are asked for more and more information. I fully recognise that it is good to identify the issues, because stresses and issues change. However, we would prefer not to spend so much of our resource tabulating issues and would like to get results at ground level. I return to our volunteers. We see our remit as putting people with two ears to listen up and down those rural lanes. While we put our limited resource into volunteers, we would like more policy being listened to or consulted on so that those documents do not just sit on a shelf somewhere.

Mr Anderson: Sam, you said that you have 31 volunteers, that you would like 60 and that you started with 26. How do you recruit your volunteers to get that broad range of skills? How do you go about that? Obviously, I could not just knock on your door and say that I want to be a volunteer.

Mr Jude McCann: Some of our volunteers have been involved since the organisation started 10 or 12 years ago. More recently, we have had volunteer recruitment events. For example, we encourage people to volunteer with us at the Balmoral show and also through the farming press. We put articles in 'Farm Week' and 'Farming Life' and encourage people to contact us if they are interested in volunteering. As Sam said, over the last year, we have increased the number of volunteers.

Mr Anderson: Are you looking for specific skills?

Mr Jude McCann: Absolutely.

Mr Anderson: You need to get a spread of skills.

Mr Jude McCann: Yes. Our volunteers have key skills. Some work on the helpline as they are trained in helpline work and will take the calls on evenings and weekends. Others do not feel comfortable with that, but they will go out to agriculture shows and marts and help to promote the organisation. Other volunteers do outreach work, and they tend to be retired DARD advisers and farmers who have that technical and practical support. We are looking for different types of volunteers.

Mr Anderson: What number of volunteers do you want to work with to see your organisation going forward?

Mr S Campbell: When I look at the geography, I sometimes have to pinch myself and say that the six counties in Northern Ireland are the same size as Cork, so I see that as the geographical basis. However, when I look at the 24,000 or 25,000 farm businesses, the rural environment and the population, I believe that we are asking too much of our 31 volunteers. It comes down to their expertise, their counselling skills or whatever their area of expertise. Unfortunately, they are volunteers, and we cannot turn them into full-time employees, because they are not. I feel that we need to double those numbers to be most effective. We would love to be on the top side of 50. That would not only give better geographical coverage but give a range of skills because the 31 volunteers,

while all their skills are well honed, are not all capable of doing exactly the same thing. There may be 31 volunteers across a 100 mile by 80 mile area, but maybe only half a dozen specialise in a particular expertise. We need to be able to grow that.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): My final question is: what difficulties do you think are associated with the measurement of rural poverty?

Mr Jude McCann: I mentioned hidden poverty, which does not always show up in statistics. When statistical research is done in super output areas, often there are hidden pockets of rural poverty that do not show up on any of those statistics, so something has to be done to ensure that we are not overlooking poverty in rural areas.

Mr S Campbell: That could be a hard topic. I think that Tom mentioned that it is not always small farmers or large farmers; there can be issues across the range, and at times it is about getting people to swallow their pride and share with us their issues with rural poverty so that we can start the whole ball rolling. That is the difficult part. We get great support from the agri-press: the 'Irish Farmers Journal', 'Farm Week', 'Farming Life' and the local press. There is not a week that we do not have press coverage. We are not able to pay for that — we are not a press-funding organisation — but we get a lot of support and so on, right down from DARD Direct offices to people going up and down farm lanes or rural areas. That is where we think that we need to put our resource and get the word of mouth that we need. That is the best way to get our support out to people: word of mouth.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): Is it possible for the Committee to have a copy of the strategic document that was sent to DARD?

Mr Jude McCann: Certainly.

The Chairperson (Mr Irwin): I would appreciate that.

Thank you very much again for your presentation. I commend you for the work that you do, especially as you are doing it in a voluntary capacity.

Mr S Campbell: On behalf of my colleagues, Chair, thank you and all your colleagues very much. You have given us a lot of time, which we very much value. We hope that we can be in a position to continue not only to provide the support that we have done over the past 10 or 12 years but to do that in a much more tangible way going forward. I want to train more volunteers and get more one-to-one support.

Ms McCracken: If any of you want to volunteer to join the board, you would be very welcome.

Mr S Campbell: She never misses an opportunity.

Ms McCracken: I do not think that we have a politician on the board.

Mr Elliott: That is why you are doing so well. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McCracken: We do not have a vet on the board, and I would be very keen for that. Vets are out there at the worst of times and see the stress that people are under. We are working on that. Thank you very much indeed.