

**PAULINE KEEGAN
DIRECTOR OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

7 NOVEMBER 2014

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE
OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

INQUIRY INTO BUILDING A UNITED COMMUNITY

Introduction

1. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has not been allocated any funding from the Building a United Community Strategy, nor is it one of the lead departments taking forward headline actions. However the Department, through its Rural Development Division, do report on actions which support the strategy under the Rural Community Development Support Service which is delivered through the local Rural Support Network structure. The Department does not wish to submit oral evidence.

Evidence

2. Part of the Department's commitment to improving community relations and building a united and shared society, as outlined in the strategy, is reflected in the work of the Rural Support Networks (RSNs) which deliver the rural community development support service funded through DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme. Contracts for the delivery of a rural community development support service have been in place with 8 lead service providers since April 2012. As part of these contracts the Networks are required to promote and support measures to alleviate poverty, social isolation and inequality; and improve community relations in rural areas through community engagement. In addition, in 4 contract areas there is a specific requirement to deliver a community development service for the Unionist population living in rural border areas through actions such as: improving inter-community and cross-community relationships by, for example, addressing misconceptions, building trust, creating space for dialogue and discussion. From November 2013 the Department has also provided funding through the DSD Thematic Regional Support for Faith Based Engagement programme for two Project Officers to work in rural areas promoting and supporting the involvement of churches and faith based volunteers in social action projects to alleviate poverty, social exclusion and to improve the quality of life for people living in disadvantaged rural areas.

3. Building good relations within and between communities is at the core of work of the Rural Support Networks. Community Development is the ethos of these organisations and they believe that good solid community development cannot be built without underlying good relations between groups and communities. The work that the RSN's undertake in relation to supporting individuals and groups to avail of Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding and the other TRPSI programmes and projects has contributed to community confidence and improvements in the lives of those living in the rural communities. The thematic events that they organise regularly to review the impact of social policy changes are well attended by the community groups from all areas and present opportunities to develop inter community relationships.

4. The Department are members of the 'Beyond Belfast' group which represents the views of rural stakeholders in relation to good relations. As part of Community Relations Week in June 2014 a Conference was held with the theme of "Together Building a United Community – Looking Beyond Belfast". The key messages that came from the conference and which we support in relation to this inquiry were:-

- The Strategy has had little obvious impact on "rural" to date with the perception in the rural areas is that the programme is too urban centred.
- Strict adherence to rural proofing of all programmes/projects being funded under this strategy needs to be undertaken.
- "Good Relations" needs an agreed accepted definition with a consistent set of standards and a code of practice for good relations funding.
- Good Relations needs to be central to the Community Plans being drawn up by local authorities.

5. I apologise for the delay in getting this information to you.



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