Rural Support

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The Committee Clerk
Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA)
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Stormont

Subject: Consultation Response – Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill (Bill 24/22-27)

Dear Committee Clerk and Members of the AERA Committee,

Thank you for reaching out to Rural Support and inviting our organisation to provide evidence on the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill. We are deeply grateful for the Committee's recognition of our work. It is heartening to know that Rural Support is valued as a trusted voice on the frontline, keeping a finger on the pulse of the acute financial, social, and mental health pressures facing Northern Ireland's farmers and farm families.

We fully understand the high-profile nature of this Private Member's Bill and appreciate why the Committee is seeking our perspective on how structural and economic hardship translates into rural mental health crises, isolation, and farm vulnerability. We have completed the Citizen Space survey and hope our reflections based on the lived experience of our clients will support the decisions made regarding this Bill.

After careful internal review of our operational data and strict confidentiality guidelines, we must respectfully decline the invitation to participate in the oral session for this specific Bill.

At present, the data captured through our helpline and support services does not specifically break down or categorise clients based on whether their holding sits within a designated Area with Natural Constraints (ANC). Because our reporting framework is not structured around these specific agricultural designations, we cannot provide the precise, quantified baseline trends regarding ANC-specific farm distress that the Committee requires for robust legislative scrutiny.

Furthermore, as a confidential support service, we maintain a strict policy never to discuss or disclose details of individual cases. Given that we may only have a limited number of clients within specific, geographically isolated ANC areas, we are concerned that presenting anonymised data or localised case studies could inadvertently make a vulnerable client easily identifiable within their close-knit rural community. Protecting the privacy and trust of the families we support must remain our absolute priority.

However, while we cannot provide an analysis segregated by ANC status, we feel it is vital to share the broader, clear trends we are witnessing across the sector. Our published support line data and ongoing social media outreach highlight a direct and alarming correlation between rising financial distress, severe loneliness, and poor mental health among our farming community.

Crucially, our frontline experience consistently demonstrates that a lack of financial support, or any sudden reduction in existing support payments, serves as an immediate trigger for heightened psychological distress. Farm businesses operate on exceptionally tight margins, and direct support payments often represent the difference between viability and insolvency. When these essential lifelines are absent or reduced, the resulting financial insecurity acts as a primary catalyst, directly driving and compounding severe mental health issues within the farm family.

When farmers reach out to us under these conditions, the acute pressures of escalating costs and reduced financial predictability present as a devastating psychological cluster. The primary presenting issues our teams encounter include:

- **Severe Anxiety and Depression:** Driven by chronic, relentless financial strain and long hours spent working in isolation.
- **Suicidal Ideation:** A deeply concerning escalation resulting from the intense feeling of being trapped by overwhelming debt or unviable farm metrics.
- **Cognitive Paralysis and Inability to Think Rationally:** An inability to process complex problems or make clear operational choices. When a farm family is pushed into a mental health crisis, their capacity to run a farm business effectively and safely collapses entirely.

Our findings reveal that the mental well-being scores of farmers actively engaging with our services are roughly 40% lower than the general population average. These statistics reinforce that economic hardship, and the stability of support frameworks are never just balance sheet issues; they directly impact the human capital and mental resilience of the farm.

Rural Support remains entirely committed to supporting the vital work of the AERA Committee. We would welcome any future opportunities to contribute our unique insight on broader rural mental health strategies, succession planning anxiety, or general agricultural crisis management where our data aligns perfectly with your inquiries without compromising client anonymity.

We wish the Committee well as it navigates the remaining stages of this important Bill. Thank you once again for your recognition and your continued support of Northern Ireland's farming community.

Yours Sincerely

KReilly

Keelin Reilly
Rural Support
Chief Executive Officer

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Is a registered charity in Northern Ireland (charity number 102591) and is a company limited by guarantee (registered number NI42579)