



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Rural White Paper Action Plan: DARD
Briefing

21 January 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Niall Heaney	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Colette McMaster	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome Colette McMaster, grade 5 and Niall Heaney, grade 7. Members have had a chance to read your briefing paper, so I ask you to take no more than 10 minutes, if that is OK, and then we will go straight into questions. Colette, are you leading off?

Mrs Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Yes, I am. Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to make this presentation regarding the first annual progress report on the implementation of the rural White Paper action plan. With me is Niall Heaney, who is the DARD policy lead for the rural White Paper action plan. The annual progress report 2013 was published on the DARD website on 9 January 2014 in line with the monitoring arrangements agreed for the rural White Paper action plan.

The action plan is an Executive initiative led by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that aims to address key challenges facing rural communities in Northern Ireland. The rural White Paper action plan was approved by the Executive in May 2012 and formally launched by the DARD Minister in June 2012. The action plan provides a framework for a more integrated approach across all Departments to address the challenges affecting rural areas. The action plan acknowledges that no one Department has exclusive responsibility for rural areas. It contains commitments on rural issues by all Departments. The actions are grouped under five themes: urban-rural linkages, access to services, rural communities, rural economies and the countryside.

Responsibility for implementing the actions contained in the action plan lies with the lead Department specified and sets out the arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the actions contained in the document. The monitoring arrangements provide for Departments to report back regularly to DARD through the interdepartmental committee on rural policy (IDCRP) on progress in implementing their commitments in the action plan. The IDCRP is made up of senior civil servants from all

Departments and is chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The IDCRP was responsible for overseeing the development of the action plan, and it has a key role to play in monitoring its implementation. DARD coordinates across government the delivery of the rural White Paper action plan. The monitoring arrangements also provide for DARD to publish the annual progress report on its website. A copy of the annual progress report is also sent to the Executive, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the other Assembly Statutory Committees and the other organisations represented on the rural White Paper stakeholder advisory group.

In July 2013, the IDCRP met to discuss progress on implementing the action plan during its first year of operation and to agree the format for the annual progress report. Following that meeting, each Department provided input to DARD for inclusion in the annual progress report. The first annual progress report, 2013, details the good progress made by Departments in implementing their commitments in the action plan during its first year of operation since it was launched in June 2012. Therefore, the period of the first year is from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013.

DARD has a number of commitments in the rural White Paper action plan, and it has made good progress in taking those forward. In particular, DARD has progressed a number of joint initiatives in association with other Departments as part of the Programme for Government commitment to bring forward a £13 million package to tackle rural poverty and social isolation. During the period of the report, the farm family health checks programme, which is a joint initiative between DARD and the Public Health Agency, has seen around 2,300 clients receive a health check at farmers marts and at rural community events, while joint working between DARD and DSD in 200 hard-to-heat homes and DARD and Power NI in 300 further hard-to-heat homes has resulted in over 500 vulnerable rural homes receiving energy efficiency measures. DARD has also uprated a rural challenge programme that is designed encourage rural community and voluntary groups to identify poverty and social isolation needs in their community and to propose initiatives to address those needs.

DARD continues to support the implementation of rural proofing across government through the provision of guidance and training to seek to ensure that rural needs and circumstances are considered by Departments as part of their policymaking. DARD has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to undertake a number of rural research projects to help inform the future development of rural policy, including tackling rural poverty and social isolation.

With regard to the next steps, the Minister has made it clear in the foreword to the annual report that she sees the rural White Paper action plan as a live initiative that continues to respond to the needs of our rural communities and delivers meaningful outcomes for rural dwellers. She intends to ask her Executive colleagues to identify new and challenging actions in their Departments for inclusion in a refreshed action plan to be produced during 2014.

As a next step, the IDCRP will meet some of the key stakeholders who are represented on the rural White Paper stakeholder advisory group to discuss the annual progress report for 2013 and take their views on the current issues and challenges facing rural communities that might be addressed through new actions in a refreshed rural White Paper action plan. A further meeting of the IDCRP will be arranged to discuss opportunities for identifying new actions in Departments for inclusion in a refreshed action plan to be developed in the coming year. DARD will continue to monitor progress by Departments on implementing the action plan and will produce a second annual progress report towards the end of 2014 in respect of the period of operation up to 30 June 2014. We are happy to take any questions or comments you might have.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Colette, for your presentation and information. The action plan has been delayed, as has the annual monitoring report. I am led to believe that it was delayed because of Departments not coming forward with their plans. Is that the case, and can you name the Departments?

Mrs McMaster: The delay occurred in the first year of the operation of the plan. At the outset, the date for publishing the report on the first year's period was September 2013. The first year of operation of the plan was up to 30 June. On reflection and in hindsight, that was a very ambitious date, because the year's operation was not over until 30 June. Gathering together the information covering that first year happened after 30 June. It was down to the practicality of getting that input together over the holiday period, which, in effect, that was, and we were in recess. Departments had to put the input together and clear it with Ministers. Our experience from doing that is that it was probably an over-ambitious time to set for the progress report to be published. We will review that for the future.

The Chairperson: We have always had a concern that although there are many good things and targets in the rural White Paper action plan, it had no real enforcement powers and no teeth. Many of these things are very good, and some of them could well happen anyway. What real difference has the rural White Paper made to rural living?

Mrs McMaster: The action plan was developed following the consultation on the rural White Paper action plan. It picked up on the needs identified by stakeholders, so the actions in it seek to address those needs. Each Department has its own actions and commitments, and they are committed to lead on their specific actions. We can talk about the DARD actions that we have delivered on and whether those are actions by DARD or actions by DARD acting jointly with other Departments.

Mr Niall Heaney (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): One of the key actions was that it helped to bring rural areas to high priority at Executive level, which had never been done before. It meant that other Departments had to take their responsibilities seriously. The fact that we are having a monitoring point at this stage and will bring stakeholders in, along with departmental officials from the IDCRP, will provide a challenge role. That will also help to identify new actions moving forward.

Some of the key actions that have been brought forward have demonstrated that joint working at departmental level has proven very effective. Some of the health work that we are doing with the farm families health checks in conjunction with DHSSPS and the Public Health Agency (PHA) has been very good. The outworking of that has been very good. A number of other things are working well with different Departments, such as the boreholes scheme with DRD. You could argue that some of those actions might have gone ahead anyway, but I would imagine that a lot of the bigger ones would not have gone ahead without the joint funding and commitment of Departments as a result of the rural White Paper.

The Chairperson: OK. Four actions seem to be missing from the targets and original actions — 90, 92, 93 and 94. Action 90, for instance, states:

"We will work towards extending the natural gas network to main towns in the West and to East Down, to offer energy consumers additional fuel choice, along with the cost and efficiency benefits associated with natural gas."

Why has that been omitted? Is that not important anymore?

Mr Heaney: I did not think that any of them were omitted. Which numbers were they again?

The Chairperson: Actions 90, 92, 93 and 94.

Mr Heaney: There was duplication when we launched the report, so two of those have been factored into the report under OFMDFM.

The Chairperson: So they have amalgamated with other action plans?

Mr Heaney: No, they are probably just duplicated.

The Chairperson: Oh, yes, I remember.

Mr Heaney: You remember way back, but I think that that referred to only two of them. I will just check that. I think that 92 and 93 are factored in elsewhere in the report.

The Chairperson: Yes. Well, we will not take up time with that now. You could check that and investigate actions 90, 92, 93 and 94.

Mr Heaney: Yes because they should all be factored in.

The Chairperson: If they have been amalgamated with another action, perhaps you could address that and get that detail to us.

Mr Heaney: Yes, will do.

Mr Swann: Where did you find most resistance to some of the recommendations? Was it from departmental staff or resource?

Mr Heaney: The main resistance was to the fact that there was no budget, and we were already working in restricted budgetary times. So, although there were a lot of things that I would have liked to have done, Departments already had their own priorities on this and they would have done things on a regional basis. We had to do a bit more work on differentiation. For example, we had to do a lot of home visits for our maximising access project rather than just put a poster on a website or send a mailshot. Things such as that were much more labour-intensive.

We got over it in some areas. If we had a bit more money, we could probably do a lot more work on other areas, but the biggest barriers are probably to do with cost and resource intensification.

Mr Swann: Do you find, when you go into other Departments' forward work programmes, that they are consulting more and taking note?

Mr Heaney: They are, and they are actually asking us, for input on how they can rural proof adequately to see whether there are different needs. We see them only if we are cutting across at, say, Executive level. Some Departments will be aware of the action plan and ask us, but others will not know about it. We cannot police it because it is the responsibility of other Departments, but we provide support and advice on rural proofing to help them to identify any rural needs for any policies that they are bringing forward.

Mr Swann: In regard to your resources and responding to those requests, are you adequately staffed so that you are not delaying another Department's process of work by the time you get back to them?

Mr Heaney: With regard to the rural proofing aspect, some of that work is carried out by the likes of the Rural Development Council, which is contracted to carry out training. In a lot of cases, we signpost the council to other people who can provide much closer-to-the-ground advice than we could provide. That is not really as intensive for us, but it is getting them engaged with their stakeholders at an early stage.

Mr McMullan: How is the Going for Growth programme going?

Mrs McMaster: Although Going for Growth is not part of the White Paper —

Mr McMullan: No but it is in there —

Mrs McMaster: It is in there as an action. DARD and DETI are jointly leading on that but working across all Departments to develop a response to the Going for Growth recommendations. An interdepartmental group has worked on that, so we have been working collaboratively with other Departments to develop that response. That response is now at the point where it is to be considered by Ministers.

Mr McMullan: Will the recent court case hold back any of the programmes in the rural White Paper or funding?

Mrs McMaster: We have actions in the paper committed to by DARD and actions committed to by other Departments. The recent case was in relation to the EU-funded rural development programme. The actions that are in here from other Departments are outside of that. To date, a lot of the funding from DARD for actions in the rural White Paper has come from the tackling rural poverty and social isolation fund. That is separate from the rural development funding.

Mr Heaney: It is national money, so it does not impact on the funding carried through in the rural White Paper action plan. We in DARD are working with no EU funding in this.

Mr McMullan: So, the White Paper is safe?

Mr Heaney: As far as we know, it is safe. Any of the actions that we are carrying forward, we are using national money rather than European money.

Mr McMullan: And the other Departments are still going ahead with their funding?

Mr Heaney: They are still going ahead with their commitments. From what we have seen to date, they seem to be doing well.

Mr McMullan: That is good.

Mrs McMaster: The opportunity now, having done the first year of operation, is to look at how we refresh that action plan across government.

Mr McMullan: There have been successes in the first year.

Mrs McMaster: Yes.

Mr McMullan: I have to talk to some groups about that. It is very encouraging indeed. Will we be looking at them this year to see how they get on to improve in the second year?

Mrs McMaster: Yes, we will continue to monitor the actions that are committed to in the existing action plan, which included from the start short-, medium- and longer-term actions. Those are ongoing. We will also speak to Departments to identify new actions that we could include in the action plan in future.

Mr McMullan: That is excellent.

Mr Byrne: I am sorry that I had to go out. I apologise.

I welcome the presentation. I want to make a general comment about the rural White Paper. The issues that I keep hearing about are rural post offices, rural community transport, rural primary schools, broadband facilities and home help. Those are the issues that most affect people who live in rural areas. I welcome the Department's efforts on rural community transport and maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas (MARA), but there is no mention of those other issues, whether they are for your Department or others. How can we go about tackling some of the issues, such as rural post offices, rural primary schools and home help?

Mr Heaney: The Department of Education has responsibility for primary schools. On occasions, we get correspondence asking us to support a school threatened with closure, but, because policy rests outside DARD, there is very little that we can do. A Minister could lobby in support of it. Post offices are outside government funding, so there is very little that we can do. We have looked at how we can help rural businesses. A post office is one business that could be of support under the rural development programme. There are opportunities. Post offices get quite a lot of funding through Treasury to carry out a lot of work. However, I do not think that DARD can intervene, because the funding of post offices is not a devolved matter. We looked at that in the past because post offices, schools and libraries are an integral part of the lifeblood of rural communities, but I think that we were told by Treasury that it was not a devolved matter and DARD could not intervene.

They have schemes in England and Wales that looked at helping to support post offices. It is called the post office local model. However, that is more to do with providing better signage, better access for people with disabilities and things such as that. Maybe there is scope to do something along those lines. However, we would need post offices to tell us what support they need. I know that there is a Treasury fund for the support of post offices. They could maybe utilise that to best effect.

You mentioned home help. We hear on occasion that that is a big issue because of the time involved. In rural areas, you have to take account of the travel needs, the additional cost of travel and the additional time it takes to travel. That is something that you could press the Health Department on. DARD's hands are tied. We can come as part of a new action to push the Health Department to do something. It has its own priorities. Perhaps this Committee could work with the Health Committee to do something. We would be quite keen to do something such as that.

We have schemes under the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework aimed at connecting elderly people. There is a pilot ongoing in west Tyrone. There is an issue about home help and people not getting the help and support that they would like, even if it is just a matter of sitting down for five minutes for a chat and things such as that. You could not measure that, but the connecting the

elderly programme is running into that. We are doing that in conjunction with the PHA. There is scope to develop that, but we would need the Health Department on board. Considering its budgets and priorities, it just may not work out. We would obviously like to do that, because it is very useful, but it is about how we get it to live up to that and how we get the Health Minister to sign up to that. That is the difficulty.

Mr Byrne: I raise those issues because they are the up-front issues that people living in rural areas are most concerned about. That raises this question: in developing the rural White Paper, does DARD have to wait until other Departments formulate generic policies of rural proofing and rural development, or must DARD seize the initiative and highlight the issues that are of real concern to rural people?

Mrs McMaster: At the end of this first year of operation, the Minister said that she would be looking to Departments to put new and more challenging actions into a refreshed plan. We propose to go about that by convening another meeting of the interdepartmental committee and have that committee meet the key stakeholders from the stakeholder advisory group. We want to hear from stakeholders their reflection on what has been done so far, the key issues for those stakeholders and whether they feel that such issues are being addressed through the rural White Paper. Through that sort of forum, which is coordinated by DARD but also involves all other Departments, there is the opportunity to do that as part of the review that we intend to do next. There is scope for all of that to happen and for that discussion to identify issues that are key to stakeholders and see how they may be addressed.

Mr McAleer: I note that there seems to be good progress in meeting the targets; the majority are labelled green or on-target. Are the targets challenging and robust enough? I am looking, for example, at the OFMDFM target for the social investment fund. By virtue of the way that deprivation is measured, no rural areas are in the top 10% most deprived in the North. So, are these targets not robust and challenging enough, and is that why they carry such good weight?

Mrs McMaster: Certainly, there is a range of actions in there, and Niall said at the beginning, we know that some of the actions have had a good impact. So, good stuff is being done, but it is a starting point, and it may be that other, more challenging things could be. The Minister is certainly keen to encourage others to think in that way.

Mr Heaney: When the social investment fund was first tabled in draft format, a massive number of rural areas were not even included. So, I think that we got it moved to include, geographically, all of Northern Ireland, which was, at least, one step. We have got engagement from our social investment fund (SIF) community groups that are set up in rural areas. A lot of work is to be done, but pushing it further is something that our stakeholders can challenge OFMDFM officials on at the meeting. Our stakeholders in the Rural Development Council and Rural Community Network have spoken to us about their difficulties with SIF, and we have relayed those to OFMDFM.

Mrs Dobson: I apologise for missing your briefing. I have a question on the MARA programme. I know that the Deputy Chair touched on this briefly. If I am right, the aim is to offer 12,000 rural households a visit from a trained enabler. Will you update us on that?

Mrs McMaster: Are you in a position to do that, Niall?

Mr Heaney: I can write to you with that information, because it is not something that I am totally involved in. It is done through outwork agents in the rural development division and with the Public Health Agency. I can get you a written update, if that suits.

Mrs Dobson: OK.

Mr Heaney: But work on MARA has been progressing very well.

Mrs Dobson: But you have no figures.

Mr McAleer: Sparks flew during yesterday's debate in the Chamber. I think that the Minister said yesterday that the MARA project had resulted in funding of £433,000 being brought into rural homes

Mrs Dobson: Five.

Mr McAleer: — as a result of *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Dobson: Five thousand to date.

Mr Swann: You were on the ball.

Mrs Dobson: You were keeping awake, Declan.

The Chairperson: Very impressive, Declan.

Mr Heaney: Do you want a current update or the figures as of June last year?

Mrs Dobson: A current update would be useful. Thank you.

Mr McAleer: Robin Swann has not worked out his modulation rate yet.

Mr Swann: I know exactly what it is; I'm just not telling.

The Chairperson: You work best under pressure, Declan.

Mr McAleer: No, I was watching the sparks flying, you see. I just watch them, you know. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Have you finished, Jo-Anne?

Mrs Dobson: No, I have not got the figures, but I am satisfied that Niall will come back with those for me. Thank you.

The Chairperson: I am trying to get into the nitty-gritty. If you do not know what I am talking about, give me a shout, and I will try to get you to the action point. How is the DARD-appointed statistician getting on with his work? That relates to action 32.

Mrs McMaster: A new person started in September 2013. That person is doing a range of things. That relates to one of the first actions, or to the first action on our action plan. We hope that work on actions 5 and 32, which are to do with the review of the current classification of settlements, will commence in 2014. That person joined us in September 2013. That is going to be very helpful to us, certainly in respect of taking forward that couple of actions. We were missing that expertise in-house, and were not able to dedicate expertise to that.

Mr Heaney: Part of that work will also be looking at what information is out there from all Departments and pulling out the rural bits. They will be coming to us and asking us for information, and we can point them in the right direction and say, "There's a lot of information here that could help you make better policy".

The Chairperson: I want to tie in with Declan McAleer's point on super output areas. I think we can all accept there is a skewed measure between rural and urban. Is it in the statistician's remit to challenge those and make sure that the targets and the actions in the action plan are hitting the true target?

Mr Heaney: Because it is a DARD statistician, they will only be able to help DARD actions. That is the unfortunate thing. I spoke to expert stakeholders, and the Rural Community Network was very strong in its views about the noble indices and how they measured deprivation. In the past, the Minister has written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel Minister about that to see whether there is any scope to look at disadvantaged rural areas, because of the smaller settlement size. I think that that work is part of the rural and urban classification group that the Finance and Personnel Minister will be setting up, and it will cut across all Departments. It is a whole package of work to be brought forward. Any change in the definition of rural or impact on statistics will have an adverse impact on all areas, so it will be across the Executive.

The Chairperson: So, if the Executive are going to set up a group in connection with DFP and OFMDFM —

Mr Heaney: I think that DFP is going to set up a group, with all Departments represented, to look at urban and rural classifications. They did that in the past, before the rural White Paper developed, but it went to the default settlement size. So now with [*Inaudible.*] they are looking at this again. DFP has been advised that it will be 2014-15 before it can look at this. As part of that work, they will also look at how you measure and look at how rural is different from urban and such things as deprivation indices. That will be part of that work.

The Chairperson: How does the rural White Paper action plan sit with that?

Mr Heaney: When we were brought forward, we saw that as one of the actions in the White Paper. So, we keep asking DFP for updates on that and to push that. It is an issue that it should be contributing to and answering. Once its thinking is further developed on this, when we are going out for our further actions, we will expect something to come through strongly from DFP on this.

The Chairperson: OK. I move now to my final question. From action points 53 onwards, you talk about the relationship between DARD and the Department down in the Republic of Ireland. Action 56 states:

"We will share our experiences".

Action 57 states:

"We will co-operate through formal and informal".

Action 58 states:

"We will work closely together in the implementation of our respective Rural White Papers".

Surely that is all common sense. Surely that is stuff and work that was having to go on. We do not need it put down on paper.

Mrs McMaster: It is capturing something. There is good practice there too, so it is capturing stuff that is happening, and which we want to continue to happen.

The Chairperson: Which will always be green and will always happen anyway. My question is this: do we need 90-odd action plans, when we do 50% of those things anyway and it is good governance to do it?

Mrs McMaster: We work with colleagues in the South on a number of formal strategies or action plans. That sort of work is reflected in a range of action plans. I suppose that having it means that we can come back to it; it is there and can be monitored. If progress is made, it can be formally noted and so on. From that point of view it is helpful. It is something that happens, but it is about making sure that it is visible.

The Chairperson: OK. You will get back to us about the missing action points.

Mr Heaney: Yes and on MARA.

Mrs McMaster: Yes. There are a couple of things that we will come back to you on.

The Chairperson: OK. There are no further questions. Thank you very much for your time today.

Mrs McMaster: Thank you.