DARD Public Consultation on Policy Proposals for a Rural Proofing Bill

Intro

It is positive that DARD and the Minister are aiming to put rural proofing on a statutory footing. In our view rural proofing to date hasn’t been delivering as much as it should have for rural communities – RCN, along with other rural stakeholders, has repeatedly raised concerns that rural proofing is not taken that seriously by policy makers in other Departments.

The Rural White Paper Action plan committed DARD to supporting the implementation of an enhanced rural proofing process across all Departments.

Rural proofing will also have an impact on Community planning at local government level and service delivery by Councils as the policy proposals state that DARD will work with local government and other government departments to ensure a collaborative and joined up approach (Para 7.3).

The full document is available to read at this link:


The Department has organised a series of public consultation meetings across NI beginning on 19th February and finishing on 6th March (details available at the link above).

The closing date for consultation responses is 16th March

Detail of the Policy Proposals:

Aim of Rural Proofing

2.2 “The aim of rural proofing is to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of rural dwellers by addressing their needs as an integral part of the development of government policy and public services; and by evaluating the impact of government policy and public services on rural communities”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the specific key outcomes DARD hope to achieve by introducing the Bill?

Can the Bill make a commitment to mitigating adverse impacts of policy on rural communities and to deliver policy differently to meet rural needs?

Can the policy proposals define what “equitable treatment” will mean in practice – not the same as equality but would be good for DARD to set out what they understand equitable treatment to be. (see also Para 4.7)

Definition of Rural

2.6 Detail is specified on the current definition of rural as identified by the 2005 report of the Interdepartmental Urban Rural Definition Group. No reference is made to the differences between remote rural communities and those closer to urban centres.
There are technical reasons for DARD to retain flexibility in relation to definition of rural as it allows flexibility of application depending on the policy issue being rural proofed.

**QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**

Can DARD’s rural proofing proposals take account of the differences within rural communities between remote rural communities and those closer to urban centres?

**Enhancing Rural Proofing**

4.8 “DARD is committed to enhancing rural proofing so that:....

- Rural needs and impacts would be identified and addressed appropriately as a matter of course across government.

**QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**

If needs and impacts are to be identified and addressed should this be stated explicitly in the aim of the Bill?

**Policy Objectives**

**The Duty to consider the needs of People Living in Rural Areas**

5.2 “It is proposed that the Bill will introduce a statutory duty on government departments, local councils and, potentially, other public bodies to consider the needs of people living in rural areas when:

Developing new policies, strategies and plans (e.g. area or community plans) or revising existing ones; and

Designing and delivering public services or making changes to the way public services are delivered”

**QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**

Should the ‘Duty to consider’ require duty holders to mitigate adverse impact in rural communities where it is identified? There is a risk that the ‘duty to consider’, as currently worded, may mean that the needs of people living in rural areas can be considered and evidenced by the duty holder without them needing to take action to mitigate adverse impacts on rural dwellers?

**Promotion and Encouraging Rural Proofing Bill**

5.3 “DARD’s role will be to promote and encourage the need for public authorities to consider the needs of people living in rural areas…”

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Can the Bill commit DARD to secure implementation, monitoring or enforcing of rural proofing?

DARD will be required to produce and publish regular reports on rural proofing to be laid before the Assembly and that is a positive.
Can the Bill set out a clear review/evaluation process? Who will monitor implementation? Who will hold DARD, other Departments and local government/NDPBs to account on rural proofing?

Should there be a requirement on each Department to report to respective Assembly committees on their rural proofing performance throughout the year?

What other mechanisms are available?

**In Conclusion**

If rural proofing is to have a real impact then this Bill must focus on securing better policy outcomes for rural dwellers. The Bill needs to set out clearly the ethos and spirit of what the legislation is hoping to achieve.

In RCN’s view the Bill needs to be more explicit in its wording if we are to see better outcomes in policy making for rural communities.