

Consultation on DARD Strategic Plan 2012-2020

A Response from the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)

**Rural Development Council (RDC)
17 Loy Street
COOKSTOWN
Co. Tyrone
BT80 8PZ**

**T: 028 8676 6980
E: info@rdc.org.uk
W: www.rdc.org.uk**



INTRODUCTION

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the DARD Strategic Plan 2012-2020.

We have focused our response on those questions where we believe our experience and contribution can add value.

We would strongly encourage DARD to publish a clear response to key points raised by stakeholders outlining the extent to which it is possible to incorporate these points into a final strategic plan.

The role of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council [+rdc](#)

RDC was established by Government in 1991 and became a fully independent organisation in April 2009 following the Review of Public Administration announcement in March 2006.

RDC was established with a key remit to assist DARD and the Government in understanding rural affairs and in formulating effective policy and programme responses. Over the years, RDC has delivered a wide-ranging programme of research, drawing together an analysis of rural change and of leading edge thinking in tackling development issues and opportunities.

The RDC role in delivery of grant programmes has in turn provided a substantial body of project ideas and best practice which has regularly been drawn upon to illustrate the potential and scope of rural development and to support others in formulating new projects in Northern Ireland and further afield.

RDC works to support and encourage integrated rural development actions that recognise and value the contribution of agriculture, rural regeneration, the environment and culture in realising a vision of a living, working, sustainable and shared countryside.

GENERAL COMMENTS/OBSERVATIONS

- We note with regret that there are no planned stakeholder consultation events. We believe given the nature and importance of the plan in setting the direction and work priorities for the Department, *for a proposed 8 year period*, that consideration should be given to more meaningful consultation engaging stakeholders and encouraging more reflection and open dialogue. We believe this will strengthen the process and allow for a better informed strategic plan to emerge.
- We would suggest the context, whilst capturing a number of key issues and challenges, does not fully reflect the current economic climate nor does it fully capture the potential of rural in terms of population growth, economic, social and cultural development. Census figures, for example, released in September 2012 show that the Northern Ireland population increased by 7% between 2001 and 2011 with growth taking place across all districts. However, growth¹ in mainly rural districts far exceeded that in Belfast and its suburbs. We believe there is a compelling need to consider rural demographics; more people are living in the countryside, yet services are continually under threat. Demographics will have clear implications on how Departments service rural areas in the future and should clearly impact on the strategic direction of DARD in meeting the Goals presented and on how DARD seeks to influence the wider public sector on rural issues and needs.

¹ At 21% Dungannon had the largest population increase, followed by Banbridge (17%), Ballymoney (16%), Craigavon (15%), Newry & Mourne and Cookstown (both 14%).

- We welcome the focus on success and what success would look like for the Department. We do however believe it will be difficult to fully determine actions for success for the proposed timeframe of 8 years. Indeed we question whether an 8 year time frame is a realistic horizon for planning.
- We would suggest that consideration is given to when key actions will be implemented. The current presentation does not allow the reader to understand what are the short, medium or long term priorities and targets.
- It is not clear why some actions sit within a particular Goal, for example Goal 1 has a key action to create and deliver a targeted strategy for education and life-long learning and asks the question what do you see as the role of Government in relation to the skills and support needs of the sectors? We would suggest that skills and support needs should be a cross cutting objective and sits equally as well in other Goals.
- We welcome the advocacy role within Government however we believe there is a need for a similar mechanism outside of Government to bring together the collective interests of stakeholders. We believe there are sufficient structures in place that, if resourced, could provide the necessary advocacy role in support of the Rural Champion concept. The Agri Rural Forum for example provides a potential embryo for a future collective mechanism to emerge.
- Notwithstanding this advocacy role we believe that there remains an important role for the Department in delivering and brokering rural development actions and particularly welcome the intention to undertake rural pilot projects in partnership with other Departments and stakeholders. We believe these should be informed by a sound evidence base and would suggest there is a greater need to focus research on the

wider needs of rural dwellers and in particular to draw together an analysis of rural change using new census data and other social research data.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Q1. Do we need a Strategic Plan to 2020?

- We believe 2020 is too long.
- We suggest it is impossible to fully predict and account for activities over a 8 year period. Strategic plans should be refreshed over a much shorter time frame.
- We recognise alignment to EU Programming periods (to 2020) however would suggest this alignment can be on broad objectives rather than on time.
- We understand that DARD has a rural strategy that runs from 2007-2013.
- We question the 2012 start as we approach the last quarter/month of the 2012 financial /calendar year.
- We would suggest 3 year strategic periods are more appropriate commencing 2013 allowing for a more focused implementation plan. A compromise might be aligning the strategic plan to 4/5 year political mandates.

Q2. Are these still the right Goals?

- We believe the 4 goals provide sufficient opportunity to address the needs of rural areas however:-
 - ✓ We would like to see greater emphasis on rural jobs in general and in supporting the rural economy including the social economy and in addressing rural poverty.
 - ✓ We would like to see greater emphasis on addressing rural youth employment and enterprise.

- ✓ We would like to see greater emphasis on research and evidence to inform wider rural development.
 - ✓ We would like to see defined actions to support integrated approaches across the Goals for example linkages between agri food (Goal 1) and sustainable rural businesses and jobs (Goal 2) and linkages between education and life long learning (Goal 2) with Goals 1,3 and 4.
- We believe Goal 2 should be extended to read “To improve the lives of rural dwellers ***economically and socially***”

Q3. Should there be a priority ranking?

- We believe in a vision of *integrated* rural development and recognise the importance of agriculture, rural regeneration, the environment and culture in realising a vision of a living, working, sustainable and shared countryside. We therefore consider there is no requirement to priority rank Goals.
- We do however think that there is a need to provide detail on implementation of key actions i.e. when will actions be progressed, what are the short, medium and long terms actions of each Goal.

Q1.1 What do you see as the role of Government in relation to the skills and support needs of the sectors?

- We believe this action has relevance to all Goals and believe the targeted strategy for education and life-long learning should go beyond the agri food industry to include agriculture, environment and rural development actions. As the role of DARD is to facilitate the development of a thriving rural economy we believe that fundamental to this is ensuring that all sectors have the skills and experience to address the various needs of rural communities.

Q2.1 What specific actions could DARD undertake to ensure improved equality outcomes for disadvantaged and under-represented groups?

- Actions need to be well targeted. A blanket approach will not do, particularly in meeting the needs of those communities or areas most vulnerable or under-represented.
- Advocate engagement with key organisations working with disadvantaged and under-represented groups and promotion of good clear communications.
- Integrating support mechanisms into actions ensuring that the mix of capacity, project and implementation support is built into delivery.
- Reduce bureaucracy.

Q2.3 Should DARD actions include a specific focus on issues relevant to farm family units?

- Within the delivery of an integrated strategic plan and a vision of a 'thriving and sustainable rural economy, community and environment' we believe that the farm family unit is an important element and actions should be included that focus on issues relevant to each of the sectors.

Q2.4 Should DARD's rural policy be focused on advocating across Government, rural proofing and the Rural White Paper Action Plan?

- These actions whilst welcomed and needed are internal facing and we believe that DARD's rural policy needs to be able to support the desired success outlined i.e. a better understanding of the challenges facing rural communities and a more integrated approach, **inside and outside** government, to addressing them and developing rural potential.
- We believe there is a need for enhanced rural proofing. Rural proofing also needs to take account of local government policies and practice particularly in light of the Review of Public Administration and in addition the policies and practice of other agencies and the private sector.

- Enhanced rural proofing should be based around a number of integrated actions including strengthening the rural evidence base (*through a developing rural research function and thinking capacity*); piloting and testing rural solutions (*demonstrating approaches for improved and supported rural development delivery*); sharing practice and good communications (*engaging strategic partners, advocacy, information and communications*).

Q2.5 With a reduced budget, should DARD focus support on those prepared to invest in and develop themselves?

- We believe there remains a strong rationale for Government intervention in rural areas on the basis of agriculture, labour market, environmental, social/community benefit.
- This question could be taken to mean support for individuals or businesses only (farm and non-farm enterprises) and excluding rural communities. We would suggest that communities engaging in rural development actions for the greater benefit of rural dwellers also invest through voluntary labour and time and this should be supported and developed.
- We believe with a reduced budget more emphasis should be placed on promoting collaboration and working together in partnership and in finding new ways to integrate.
- We believe some new thinking is needed to encourage a broader range of ideas and initiatives away from traditional or silo mentality activities towards integrated approaches. Such thinking and development is likely to require support in the short term.
- Paramount to investment is need and we believe evidence about need should be the foundation upon which investment is made.
- Enhanced rural proofing should encourage innovative thinking in delivering mainstream public services into rural areas.
- The significant constraint on budgets calls for options for accessing additional resources. There needs to be greater complementarity of Structural Funds.

Q2.6 Should the Department focus support to certain disadvantaged rural areas or identify specific rural issues and help address those where they arise?

- We believe a mix of location and thematic approaches is required. It is likely that the identification of specific rural issues will fall towards relevant government departments to address and this is where a strong advocacy role is required, for example, Broadband and DETI.
- We also believe fundamentally that disadvantaged rural areas need support and without DARD intervention such areas have the potential to become more marginalised and disadvantaged. Disadvantage as a measure in government terms still focuses on the Noble indices and these predominately highlight/favour support to address urban disadvantage.
- We believe DARD has a role in testing out rural solutions and sharing practice as part of an enhanced rural proofing and advocacy role.

Q5.6 What options do you see for different delivery models and what would be the advantages of them?

We would encourage the Department to consider a mix of delivery models designed to meet customer and industry needs.

- The third sector must be a core part of any delivery model given its expertise and skill base and the much longer experience in comparison to other public sector models
- We suggest this mix needs to make provision for internal and external delivery roles.
- The approach to delivery needs to be efficient, effective and economic.
- Actions need to be well targeted. A blanket approach will not do.
- Appropriate mechanisms need to be put in place to achieve strategic objectives.

- More needs to be channelled through focused programmes.
- Competitive grant systems whilst relevant and required should not be the sole mechanism for achieving strategic objectives.
- We support a need for delivery models to enable 'grass roots' opinions to reach government and to actively engage stakeholders in the design and delivery of objectives/outcomes.
- We believe delivery models need to allow for flexibility and be able to respond to changing needs that may arise over the period of the plan.
- We understand that separate consultation will be required in relation to delivery mechanisms/approaches for the NI Rural Development Programme 2013-2020.

Q5.9 What incentives would encourage you to take up online services related to grants and subsidy schemes and other transactions?

AND

Q5.10 How can we ensure that by 2020, Departmental transactions with our customers are accessible and primarily carried out online?

- There is a need to support skills development in the use and potential of ICT at the basic introductory level as currently being delivered under Axis 1.
- ICT should be identified as an option to facilitate farm modernisation enabling access to capital grant assistance towards IT equipment as needed.
- Broadband and the quality of broadband in rural areas needs to be determined and limitations addressed urgently.
- Need to be realistic and accept that not everyone will (for capacity, cost and personal reasons) be able to complete transactions online and to allow for this margin.

CONCLUSION

We welcome this opportunity to respond. We hope our suggestions/comments will help to progress the strategic plan to enable it to be effective in identifying ways to achieve strategic outcomes with more targeted interventions which are cost – efficient and which can act as levers to other resources.

Should you require any further information or clarifications please do not hesitate to get in contact (details below).

RDC is an independent organisation working to ensure the collective needs and opportunities of rural areas can be realised.

RDC works to promote positive and sustainable change helping to develop and regenerate rural areas for the better.

Mission

To advance rural development

Vision

A living, working, sustainable and shared countryside

Core work

**Develop and deliver practical actions & solutions;
Provide objective, evidence based analysis;
Identify, promote and share practice.**

**Contact: Teresa Canavan
Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)
17 Loy St
Cookstown
Co. Tyrone
BT80 8PZ**

**Tel: 028 8676 6980
Email: info@rdc.org.uk
Web www.rdc.org.uk**