

Public Consultation on 'Proposals for a Successor to DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework 2011 - 2015'.

[Department for Agriculture and Rural Development]

Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) public consultation on the 'Proposals for a Successor to DARD's Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Framework 2011 – 2015'.

Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km², or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

Consultation Feedback

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes this consultation and in general the aim of DARD (along with other Government Departments and Public Bodies/Organisations) to improve the lives and fortunes of people who live in rural areas.

The Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area is predominantly rural, with many areas within the district being classed as significantly rural and isolated. For example, 14 Wards within the District appear within the 'Top 50' most deprived areas within Northern Ireland with regards to 'Proximity to Services', including 5 in the 'Top 10' [all statistics provided by NISRA]. The District should be able to benefit from the DARD's successor Framework to Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI).

Many rural areas experience negative impacts along with having to pay additional 'rural premium costs' associated with living in isolated rural communities. Other issues which those living in rural communities face include:

- Accessibility issues.
- Financial issues.
- Social isolation issues.
- Educational barriers, and employability issues.

As mentioned in the Framework for Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation, one of DARD's key objectives is to:

'... strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas.'

The Council believes that it is vital for the Department to build upon the good measures which were developed previously in order for experience, knowledge and resources not to

be wasted. The Council are aware of the work supported under the previous framework through the actions such as: the Maximising Access in Rural Areas (MARA) project; Rural Community Development Support Service provided by Fermanagh Rural Community Network and Omagh Forum for Rural Associations; Assisted Rural Travel Scheme operated by Fermanagh Community Transport and Easilink. Any new proposals should aim to strengthen the social, economic and community infrastructure within rural areas, especially those which are feeling the effects of the increased pressures on the agricultural sector and physical/social isolation.

Briefing Paper Number 7096 (House of Commons library), issued on Friday, 6 November 2015 demonstrates some shocking statistics for Northern Ireland. It states that the proportion of individuals in 'relative low income' is estimated at 20% of its population. This is the highest percentage (as a proportion of individuals) in the UK. When we compare it with the lowest UK area percentage in 'relative low income', found (the South East of England), which is estimated at 12% of the population, the difference is stark. Clearly, low income, poverty and associated difficulties are issues which affect people in Northern Ireland on a daily basis. These issues are a particular concern for those living in rural areas, such as in the Fermanagh and Omagh District, who traditionally face more difficulties and barriers than their urban-based counterparts.

Definitions of 'Poverty' and 'Rural'

In order for this document to be fully assessed and understood, the Council believes that it is vital that two definitions are included within the Consultation Document, namely '**Poverty**' and '**Rural**'.

Within this consultation the Council believes that poverty should be an all-encompassing term that not only relates to income, but to an individual's complete standard of life, including their social, cultural, material and emotional deprivation. It should not only be concerned with the economic status of an individual/community, but also their possible exclusions from 'ordinary' living patterns. This would be particularly significant when we consider the impact, and levels, of poverty for rural communities in the Fermanagh and Omagh District - some of which are quite remote and geographically spread out.

The Council also stresses the need for the Department, as part of its proposals, to outline what it sees as a '**Rural Area**'.

In the previous Framework for Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation, a rural area was defined as: '...a settlement of 4,500 or less.'

It is not clear whether the Department will be using the same criteria for the successor proposals going forward. It is also worth noting that a number of towns, for example Omagh and Enniskillen within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, although exceeding the numbers which define a rural area, still suffer from many of the same issues experienced by rural areas. For example, larger towns within the Fermanagh and Omagh District still suffer from access issues – e.g. public transport cuts, a lack of a

motorway/dual carriageway, removal of community transport links. Connectivity between rural areas and economic centres including market towns, larger towns and cities is essential to the long term sustainability of rural areas.

Accessibility within Rural Areas

One of the main challenges that people living in rural areas face is that of 'Access'. Accessibility is widely accepted, amongst rural communities, as being one of the major causes of social isolation. This not only covers 'Access to Services', but it can be looked upon more widely as classifying 'Access to Employment' and 'Access to Social Gatherings/Opportunities'.

Access also involves transport issues such as the high unit costs for transport provision in rural areas and the reduction in/removal of services due to budget cuts and other restricting factors. For individuals who may be reliant on the availability of key services, Access can be the difference between leading a fulfilling life and a mere existence, between poverty and a decent standard of living.

The west of Northern Ireland, in particular rural areas, continues to face hardships in relation to access to public transport. Continued budget cuts have resulted in reduced services with many places experiencing a cut in public transport services altogether. Vulnerable people living in rural areas, for example older people, people with disabilities and young people rely on these types of services to assist them in leading a fulfilling life - for example in accessing other key services

Research from other areas of the UK, indicates that there is a substantial difference in the percentages of people who find public transport services convenient. This shows that the provision of services (not only transport) and access to services in rural areas is not just a problem facing Northern Ireland, but is rather found wider afield - i.e. Scotland, England and Wales. With this in mind it would be extremely beneficial for the Department to look at what is taking place in other areas in order to address accessibility issues in rural areas. This shared learning approach could help the Department immensely with regards to drafting its future Action Plans, setting targets/goals.

Accessing various services is crucial for both urban and rural dwellers and businesses; however traditionally it can be significantly more difficult for those based in rural areas.

Various pieces of research (including SVCO, the Office for National Statistic, the UK's Department for Communities and Local government and the UK's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) demonstrate that both the availability and the cost of services in rural areas (particularly transport/accessibility) is crucial in terms of accessing/sustaining long-term employment, accessing healthcare and encouraging social interaction.

At present, there are a substantial number of households who do not have access to either a car or van. This figure also equates to 45% of 'one person households' and 53% of 'one person households aged 65 years and over'. Whilst within an urban setting, this can be

countered by walking, cycling, public transport and/or a taxi, within rural locations this can cause greater problems due to the increased distances to travels, alongside the fewer options to getting there.

The Council believes that the successor Framework, and subsequent Action Plan, should include reference to Rural and Community Transport. This is a service which many people within rural areas rely upon to go about their daily activities.

Other aspects which should be referenced include:

- Working with other Departments to secure investment in the rural transport infrastructure (including roads, development, and so forth).
- Working with other Departments to secure funding to ensure future provision of essential services within the rural areas (for example healthcare, education, training, leisure and childcare, amongst others.)

Rural Broadband and Telephone Issues

Another key issue faced in rural communities, particularly within the District, relates to that of poor telephone, mobile and broadband coverage and/or service. Access to these services are essential to support of economic development and job creation, enabling rural businesses to become/remain competitive as well as providing a key service to individual rural dwellers and households.. This was one of the core principles that was outlined within the former Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (2011-2015).

However, within the successor framework (which states on page 16: ‘...would continue to focus on three Priority Areas specified in the 20011-2015 TRPSI Framework i.e. Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation.’), the provision of broadband services is not mentioned as a standalone aim, despite its importance within the previous Framework. Furthermore, telephone/mobile services and/or coverage are not mentioned within the ‘Areas for Intervention’ for the successor Framework.

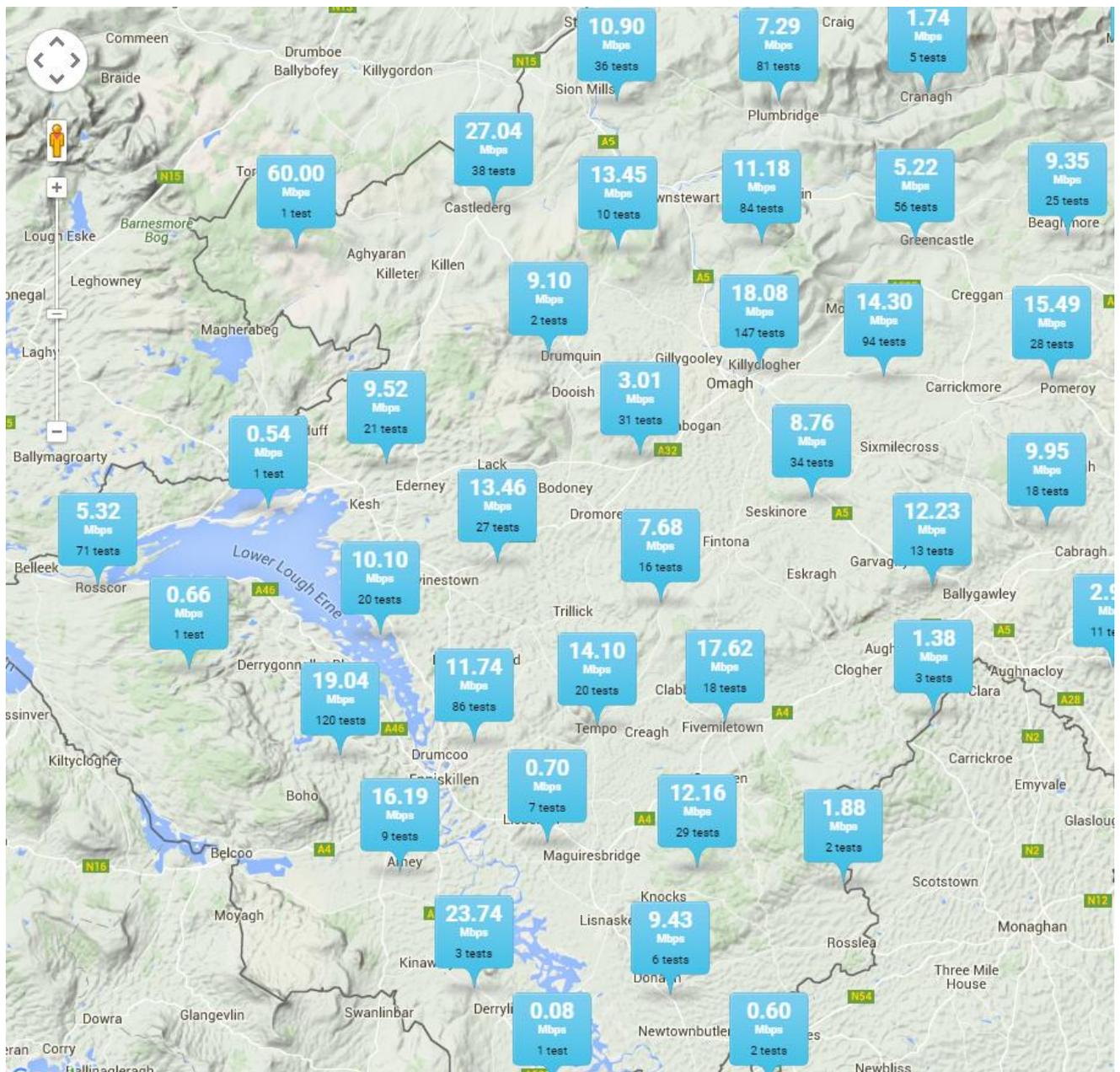
Currently, the inadequacy of broadband and mobile coverage within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area is a huge issue and one that both the legacy and the new Councils lobbied on for a number of years. The rural parts of the district have been severely disadvantaged and hampered because of little, or even no, broadband and/or mobile coverage.

The Council believes that the issue of broadband should be included as a standalone aim within any successor framework. Also included within this aim should be telephone/mobile coverage and service.

Northern Ireland has a significantly high proportion of rural based and agricultural based businesses, compared to any other area of the UK. Unfortunately, many of these businesses operate in areas which are subject to limited mobile coverage and WiFi ‘not spots’ (as opposed to ‘hot spots’). This has a detrimental impact on contact with customers (in NI and the rest of the world), suppliers, or tender applications.

The Council urges the Department, through the successor Framework to TRPSI, to work with other Departments, Community Organisations and Private Companies to improve mobile/telephone coverage, as well as working towards 100% superfast broadband coverage, not only for homes but also for businesses in both urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Included in the image below (Image 1) is a map which shows the current average broadband speeds across the District. The UK's national average broadband speeds, estimated by OFCOM in February of 2015, was: **22.8Mbps**. Although this is a substantial rise from 18.7 Mbps (estimated by OFCOM in May 2014), it is clear from the below image that the majority of rural areas in Northern Ireland are receiving nowhere close to that level of service. This is an issue of concern for Northern Ireland and in particular much of the Fermanagh and Omagh District.



(Image 1 – Average Broadband Speeds)
 [Source: Think Broadband]

Rural areas of the Fermanagh and Omagh District are extremely disadvantaged when it comes to broadband provision and speed, with some areas of the Erne West, Erne North and Erne East Wards having almost no broadband coverage whatsoever.

The Council urges the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development to continue to work in partnership to progress Rural Broadband provision in order to address this deficiency.

Social Isolation

One of the key issues raised under social isolation is to ‘...promote mental health and well-being’. The Council feels strongly that within this document there should also be some reference made to general health and well-being in order to include other aspects of health which are sometimes neglected by those who reside in rural areas. It is proven that accessing key health services i.e. GPs, hospitals and pharmacies can be more difficult in rural areas.

Specialist health care services are being re-located into hospitals within the larger more urban areas, leaving it more difficult for people in rural areas to access the necessary service. At the same time, Residential and Day Care facilities which serve rural populations are have been selected for closure. Council is concerned that the physical and emotional upheaval of relocating residents from their current locations where they are settled, to an alternative facility would also prove difficult for family members. In addition, some families may be required to travel further distances in order to visit their loved ones, thereby placing additional time and cost pressures on these families.

The council would welcome actions that will support the rural population to improve their health and well-being particularly those activities that are operated and provided at local facilities and venues.

The Department should therefore work in close partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in order to make sure that those living in rural areas do not face additional disadvantage in relation to health services, mental health services/provisions or other health and well-being initiatives and/or programmes.

The Council welcome the priority areas for intervention under social inclusion of *“increase opportunities for social engagement”* and *‘provide support to groups at risk of social isolation’* and agree with the examples of initiatives that could be supported as listed on page 21 of *‘Support health and well being activities’* and *‘Support for community capacity, rural hubs and social inclusion activities.’*

The council would welcome actions that support community capacity as our local community infrastructure is of vital importance to the fabric of life within our district and those involved in community associations and organisations are largely undertaking this role on a voluntary basis. These organisations require ongoing community development support to continue their operations on an effective and efficient basis and undertake

projects that will address poverty and social isolation issues at a local level within rural communities.

Financial Poverty

The Council believes that the inclusion of Financial Poverty as a 'focus' for the successor Framework is extremely positive. Indeed, it is positive that many issues are covered, such as:

- Reducing household expenditure and living costs.
- Increasing household incomes.
- Addressing the additional costs faced by those living in rural areas.
- Addressing barriers to escaping financial poverty.

Financial poverty within rural areas is a particular issue for many. In some cases, there may be some linkages between Financial Poverty and Social Isolation. Those individuals or families living in Financial Poverty can find themselves inadvertently being socially isolated, as they are unable to afford to take part in other activities in the local community.

NISRA statistics for the Fermanagh and Omagh District state that there are approximately 27,500 people who are 'income deprived'. This equates to just over 24% of the local population. Additionally, the last Census demonstrates that whilst 22.26% of the local District population had a degree qualification (or higher), over 43% of the District's residents had no, or low (level 1), qualifications. This figure for those with no/low qualifications is quite startling and equates to approximately 49,000 people in the Fermanagh and Omagh District alone.

Clearly, there is a substantial amount of work that needs to be done, not only from an employment perspective, but also from an upskilling perspective - allowing individuals the opportunity to gain, or increase, their skill levels and allowing them to gain employment or to specialise.

This is something that the Council believes that the Department for Agriculture should pay particular attention to, particularly when implementing or planning any successor Frameworks to TRPSI.

Target Audience / Targeting of Specific Groups of People

The Council would agree with the inclusion of all of the Targeted Groups of people mentioned on pages 18 and 19 of the Consultation Document. The Council also agrees that the successor Framework should have a degree of 'openness' whereby, if deemed appropriate, the Department may look at providing measures (or test measures) for other groups in need at a particular time.

The Council would recommend that the Department include a further group to the list i.e. 'Older people living alone'.

The Council feels that older people who happen to live on their own should be a 'key' group which is targeted by any successor Framework to TRPSI. Older people who live on their own may be more likely:

- To be less well off, having to pay all household costs by themselves.
- To suffer from loneliness or isolation.
- To eat less well than others (eating for some is seen as a social activity and therefore people on their own may be less likely to prepare full and balanced meals - thereby, increasing the chances of malnutrition).
- To suffer from health issues. Those living on their own may be more likely to have health issues going unnoticed if they have no one to inform them of certain symptoms or to assist with the correct directions or use of prescribed treatments.

To counter such issues the Department may wish to provide funding or opportunities which older people who live alone may wish to take advantage of, for example:

- Volunteering positions within the local community which could benefit other individuals/organisations.
- Classes within local communities for example 'educational' or 'skill development' classes (i.e. painting, computing).
- Extra hobbies/past-times (i.e. fitness activities, games).

Draft Action Plan

Whilst acknowledging that the detail of the Framework will be finalised following consultation, Council is supportive of the SIB recommendation that "Some common measurement framework should be established for any future TRPSI Framework. Appropriate and measurable targets should be identified which reflect the aims, objectives and outcomes of the TRPSI Framework. This could incorporate a matrix of measures reflecting some of the domain measures of the NIMDM. Where possible, impacts should be geographically mapped to provide a clearer understanding of TRPSI's impact at a local and regional level."

Council also stresses the need to define ownership of the necessary actions and to provide clear governance structures to enable a robust review and monitoring of the Framework as it evolves.

Budgetary provision.

The Council notes that £1.7 million of the TRPSI budget will move from resource to capital, with a proviso that this is spent within one year. Council strongly recommends that engagement with stakeholders is essential to ensure the identification of suitable capital projects which can be delivered within the framework.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Council believes that any successor Framework to TRPSI should ultimately revolve around the aim of 'making life better for rural dwellers, particularly those living in isolated/deprived areas.'

The Council feels strongly that the Department should look to build upon the successes of the previous Framework, work in partnership with the grass roots organisations which currently operate within rural communities, as well as taking the comments contained within this Consultation Response on board in developing any future Framework aimed at tackling Rural Poverty and or Social Isolation.