



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Brexit and Strategic Priorities:
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network,
Rural Community Network and
Rural Development Council

30 June 2016

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson)
Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr David Ford
Mr William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Edwin Poots
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Ms Majella Murphy	Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
Ms Kate Clifford	Rural Community Network
Ms Teresa Canavan	Rural Development Council

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I welcome Teresa Canavan from the Rural Development Council, Kate Clifford from the Rural Community Network and Majella Murphy from the NI Rural Women's Network. We are giving five minutes for presentations to allow members as much time as possible to ask questions and 30 minutes maximum for this part.

From my point of view, you are probably the group that is most concerned because you are likely to be the group that will be most impacted. If you want to go ahead with your presentation, we will then allow members to ask questions.

Ms Majella Murphy (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network): Thank you, Chair. We are aware that we have five minutes.

We have opted to split the presentation into three parts. I will take the introduction, Kate will take the key issues and Teresa will provide the summary and next steps. These are our initial thoughts. We ask you to bear that in mind as we are only almost a week into Brexit and it will undoubtedly signify significant change for us.

As we make our way through the presentation, we ask you to think of rural dwellers, individuals, farm families, rural businesses, community groups, social enterprises and all those who contribute to rural life in the region. Like the previous group, we find ourselves with more questions than answers — I think that there is a song in there somewhere. *[Laughter.]* The only certainty we have is that the impact will be significant in local communities, given that the EU was the instigator and consistent driver for rural development policy and practice for the past 40 years. There has been no substantial dedicated mainstream rural development fund in Northern Ireland. We have relied on European funding to largely finance rural development initiatives since the early 1990s. Brexit, therefore, creates fear and concern about the future of rural development.

The current rural development programme (RDP) is worth £630 million in total, with the rural development priority 6 element worth £80 million, of which 80% is Exchequer-funded. We urge the Committee to protect that level of funding at a minimum going forward. We would like the current funding level to be ring-fenced and protected for the duration of the RDP, and we would like the scope of activities that are currently supported in line with identified need by rural communities to be sustained. We need an assurance that rural development will not fall off the agenda as a policy for the Committee and the Executive.

Ms Kate Clifford (Rural Community Network): The issues and challenges that are presented in our position paper, which was written before Brexit, remain. They are crucial regardless of the Brexit context. As three agencies working collaboratively, we remain committed to securing a fair share for rural communities.

We recognise several issues in the context of Brexit. Many groups in rural communities are currently in receipt of EU funding, such as the European social fund and the European agricultural fund for rural development. We now need clarity about the EU's intention for that funding while the UK is in the Brexit process. For 20 years, the Government have invested in a strong rural community voluntary sector. What protection can you give to that investment, particularly as EU funding is withdrawn and other measures are negotiated and agreed? We believe that there is likely to be an adverse impact on farms, farm families and rural dwellers, meaning that now, more than ever, they will rely on infrastructural support services from the community and voluntary sector. We need to continue to invest in tackling rural poverty and social isolation, not at the expense of the rural development but complementary to any future funding that is secured.

The tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme is limited, particularly at this time, by being largely capital focused. Much is needed. The budget of £3 million to £4 million per year is key in addressing rural poverty and disadvantage. How will the Executive ring-fence similar investment into the future given the compounded effects of Brexit, austerity and welfare reform on incomes for farm families and rural dwellers? Our fear is that TRPSI will be viewed as an adequate replacement for the RDP and, given the scale of the RDP moneys coming in, it does not even come close. How will the Committee ensure that the Executive protect the interests of rural development policy and practice in future years? The Programme for Government clearly states a need for a strong competitive regionally based economy. We believe that rural development can support the delivery of that ambition. Can you, as a Committee, commit to ensuring that rural development will have an adequate resource to achieve that regional balance in the future?

As three agencies that are absolutely concerned with social justice issues, we would like assurances that the hard-won social and human rights laws enshrined in EU policy and law are protected in a new structure. It is imperative that the EU protection that is afforded to the citizens of Northern Ireland, particularly those who are most vulnerable, continues unbroken and unchanged as Brexit unfolds. In the absence of an EU policy driver, we recommend the urgent development of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. As you can see, the challenges presented by Brexit for rural people and communities are many and complex.

Ms Teresa Canavan (Rural Development Council): In summary, we ask for a clear rural development policy for Northern Ireland that fully supports vibrant sustainable rural communities in the absence of any future EU policy driver. We believe that the need to invest in rural development and rural communities exists regardless of Brexit. The issues, needs and challenges will not go away but could be further compounded by uncertainty and reduced funding.

With the development of a strong locally driven and funded rural policy, we believe that the Executive can continue to unlock the potential of rural assets. An opportunity exists to align rural needs with the ambitions of the new Programme for Government and that is something that we tried to do and demonstrate in the paper that we circulated. We need assurances that the Executive will work

collectively and in the best interests of rural people and rural development during the negotiations phase. We wholly support the need to protect the agrifood and farming sectors but stress that that cannot be at the expense of rural development.

Rural areas are home to 40% of the Northern Ireland population, which is not insignificant and therefore cannot be ignored. We need to ensure that rural areas remain places where people can live and work. In that context, we need to ensure that funding for rural development is protected, that rural development does not become the casualty or go back to a situation where it becomes farming versus rural development. We need to protect the investment for all.

On the next steps, we believe that early discussions and early decisions across the Executive are necessary to secure the immediate future of the rural economy. We urge Ministers and MLAs to ensure that the needs of rural dwellers are at the forefront of their minds as they enter post-referendum negotiations. We believe that the recently approved Rural Needs Bill can help to support this.

We ask for clarity and stability around the current EU rural development programme and assurances that funds will not be reduced. I suppose we need to reassure farmers, businesses and communities, and local action groups, that the current programme will roll out as planned. We need to engage in early planning around how this may exit and what shape a new non-EU-funded rural development programme would take or what it would look like.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the significant benefits the RDP can bring to the wider rural economy in job creation, access to services, rural tourism and village renewal. You only have to look to the last programme to realise that there were over 6,000 applications for funding. That is significant and shows a huge demand. Just over 1,800 projects were supported, 1,200 jobs created, 447 rural micro-enterprises established, and 257 rural villages and settlements benefited. Our priority is to ensure the continuation of the RDP in some guise post-Brexit that includes supporting farmers but also, importantly, continues support for the wider rural economy and communities. We cannot afford for rural areas to fall into further decline or disadvantage because of Brexit.

We also think there is value in looking at working groups, with implications across the sector. Agrienvironment and farming have been mentioned. We would include rural development in the working groups. What would be the impact, what might rural development look like, and how can we shape a positive outcome?

As a sector, we welcome the opportunity to feed in constructively. We will work with this Committee, the Minister, the Department and the Executive in general. We recognise that the word "rural" cuts across all Government priorities, and it is imperative that it does not fall between stools. We believe in and support the Rural Needs Act. However, rural affairs and the RDP remain part of DAERA, and we need assurances that a policy for rural development will be developed and resourced.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you very much, all three of you, for your presentation. My first question is going to be the same as it was to the previous presenters: has the Minister contacted you to have any discussions, give you any reassurance, or even find out what it is you need from her in going into negotiations? You are the people she needs to be speaking to before she goes into any negotiation.

Ms Canavan: We have been in touch with the Minister and are awaiting a date for a meeting. We hope that that will happen soon.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): OK, that is good. My constituency is Mid Ulster, so I am well aware of the benefits of the RDP and how much it means to any area. It had a massive impact and benefit in Mid Ulster because that is such a large rural constituency and spans a massive area. You do not need to make the case to me, and I am sure a lot of our members are in the same position. I would like to give them an opportunity now to ask questions, and I ask that the questions and responses are kept brief so that we can get through as much as possible.

Mr Irwin: I understand you have concerns about rural development and how Brexit may impact on farmers and small farmers. Surely, Europe's decision to go flat-rate on the basic farm payment has had a bigger impact, and will have a bigger impact, on small farms than any other decision that will be made. One small farmer who currently receives £20,000 of a single farm payment told me that when it goes flat rate he will have £500. That small farmer will be losing £19,500. In many cases, farmers

who produce a considerable amount of food are small landowners. My view is that Europe's decision to go flat-rate with basic farm payments is going to have a bigger impact than anything else that will happen.

Ms Canavan: That makes it even more important to have a rural development policy addressing how you can make small farmers viable. We are going to have to look at farm diversification options. If there are implications from this for the viability of small farms, then rural development becomes even more important. From our perspective, we need to see a vision for rural areas incorporating all aspects of the rural economy but, most importantly, addresses viability issues on small farms. Rural development is going to be the cornerstone of that, and that is what we would like to see. If that is the opportunity that this presents, then we will welcome it.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for coming along. Probably most of us know that a Brexit will not affect the world prices of milk or beef. Picking up on the point you made, Teresa, it has been portrayed to us — indeed, the Department has represented to us — the importance of the RDP. Can you put a figure on what that means to you? There was a meeting last night, and a number of representatives expressed concern about the uncertainty of the local action groups (LAGs), and their importance to local rural communities. I presume you are picking up on that as well?

Ms Canavan: The RDP, as regards the local action groups and support for the wider rural economy, is worth £80 million. This is a substantial amount of money, £70 million of which goes through the local action group structures and £10 million goes into rural tourism. It is a substantial investment.

Mr McGlone: What period is that over?

Ms Canavan: It is over the programme period, until 2020. The Rural Development Council, which I work for, has secured contracts within the RDP. So, there are implications for us as an organisation. We secured a contract on the rural network, which is a function, or support unit, to help support the delivery of the programme. There could be future implications on that source of funding for us.

Mr McGlone: How many people are involved?

Ms Canavan: We have 16 staff. Not all of them are fully funded through European programmes, but the vast majority are. We also secure money from the European Northern Periphery Programme so, including that, there are 10 to 12 staff who have some support from a European programme.

Ms Clifford: Patsy, there is a broader issue around the LAGs in that they lever in other money. When European money is brought in, there is investment from, for instance, the NIHE or the Public Health Agency (PHA), which is called match funding. All this supports rural development and the rural economy. It is not just the work of the LAGs in delivering the RDP, it is also the money that EU money levers into the rural economy and the connections and networking that comes when local people come together to design a future for their area. Mid Ulster is a prime example — 2,000 members of that LAG come together and network on a regular basis. They then begin to become interdependent, and that is what is at risk if the RDP goes down and there is nothing to replace it. We need to be really creative about what will replace the RDP as we move into Brexit.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I have two questions and they are interlinked. I am concerned at what this will mean for the rural women's groups, in particular. Another area of concern is that there is a high incidence of suicide among rural dwellers, particularly farmers, and I know that there were a number of programmes through the RDP. For example, two Departments, Health and DARD, worked together to support those people. I have a major concern because uncertainty will always feed into that, and this is probably the time when there needs to be an even greater focus on suicide prevention.

Ms Clifford: We have to do an awful lot of work around planning for the future. There are opportunities from this, but there are also opportunities within the Rural Needs Act, in particular, to ask other Departments to step up and take account of rural affairs. We talked about the infrastructure that has been created on the ground over the last 20 years. This Department has made a huge investment in rural community groups. Those groups have fantastic capacity and facilities, which need to be capitalised on to make sure that whatever Brexit strategy happens and whatever disinvestment happens, rural areas capitalise on the investment made over the years and bring that investment back into communities through cross-cutting themes and interdepartmental working. The

Rural Needs Act will give a basis for that and we are very grateful that it was put in place before Brexit. It will be a matter of calling other Departments to account and we hope for the support of this Committee in doing that. We need to ensure that rural areas do not lose out in farm incomes and through the uncertainty and challenges that will come. The farming industry is very different others because it covers people's livelihoods and homes. We need an assurance that the proper infrastructure is in place to support people through the changes and challenges ahead.

Ms Canavan: I would just like to add that the TRPSI programme is not EU-funded, it is funded through government. We will see a continued and sustained need for that, particularly in relation to the types of projects that you mentioned, Linda, around mental health and access to services. TRPSI also offers an opportunity, and we need to ensure that that is continued and sustained throughout all these discussions and negotiations.

Ms M Murphy: NIRWN works closely with the rural women's groups. The rural women's sector is and has been woefully underfunded. This was identified as far back as 2005, when a need was identified for a rural women's infrastructure, and money was put in by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. That funding has been significantly cut as we have gone on down the line. Now we are looking at two part-time workers — that is, me and my colleague — and we work across rural Northern Ireland as best we can. We deliver services and support to those groups, we work on the policies, we gender-proof, we rural-proof. The stark stats are that 98.7% of government funding for the women's sector goes to urban groups and 1.3% goes to rural. That is not fair; it is not a level playing field. We need to build up the sector rather than pull the rug out from under it. Women are the backbone of rural society. Cullaville women's group has worked with the LAG. It has accessed funding through the last rural development programme for a new community centre there. That is 12 women who are doing that work. Most of our community groups are run by women. I am not taking away from the men, but most of the women are doing the work.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you. We appreciate that.

Mr Anderson: I do not know how I can follow that. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Canavan: Carefully. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Anderson: Thank you for coming along today. It is good to see you again, Teresa. You are very welcome. I have been a rural dweller all my life, and I have served, as you know, on many rural organisations, including RDC. I have suffered many meetings there. Going forward, we have 40% of a rural population here. No matter what is done or what happens after Brexit, there has to be that engagement in working with rural people to promote many aspects of rural life. A great word coming out today from the very first presentation this morning is "uncertainty". There is uncertainty, but the word that I will use today is "opportunity". I believe that there are great opportunities for rural people as we go forward. I am sure that people like you have found this. You are talking about working with politicians, but local councils will also feed into this greatly and there needs to be more engagement with them. You have asked for a meeting with the Minister, but will you work through the local councils to try to see what their vision is following on from the decision to leave the EU?

Ms Canavan: Absolutely. If I can just address a couple of points in relation to uncertainty, for us, the uncertainty is the immediate future and what happens with the current rural development programme. Will it roll out as planned? Will it last until 2020? That gives a bit of time. If we understand what is happening with the current rural development programme, that might create a bit of stability. That is what we need and that is what we are trying to articulate. We are working with a large rural population, and there are two ways of looking at it: we stand to lose out or we stand to benefit. We are on the side of benefit. We want to be assured that there will be a policy put in place that looks at how rural development moves forward and how people in rural Northern Ireland can be addressed post-Brexit. So, we would like answers to those questions.

We all work with local councils quite well. We believe that community planning is a huge opportunity, but, again, councils need to be resourced to be able to look at how they address rural needs in their constituencies. If you take the rural development programme out of councils, that is a big amount of money, so we need to look at what will replace that. We want to work closely with councils. We think that if we can tie together community planning and the Programme for Government, there are huge opportunities, but you cannot get away from the fact that, historically, rural development has been an EU-funded programme, and that creates huge concern for us if that cannot be replaced. That is where we are.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you. I appreciate that. Having just come out of a council, I can tell you that we relied heavily, and we are very happy that the money came before this happened.

From our point of view, I asked the question in the Chamber the other day about the rural development fund and whether it would be there until 2020. Based on the response, I cannot say that I can give you an absolute assurance here today. I will certainly be pursuing it, and I am sure that we, as a Committee, will pursue it with the Minister. It is vital and certainly needs to be prioritised in any negotiations. I would not have taken any solace from the response in the Chamber. That is just me being perfectly straight about it.

I will finish the session, if everybody is happy enough. Thank you very much.

Ms Clifford: Sorry, may we just say that the priorities that we have listed in the paper that we submitted pre-Brexit still stand? Very much so. We would welcome an opportunity to sit with you and work out what would happen with a rural development policy for Northern Ireland and how that might be configured to allow for balanced regional development in the future. We think that is absolutely essential, particularly if we are on the periphery. If our border areas are on the periphery of Northern Ireland and our rural areas are on the periphery of Belfast, we need balanced regional development, and we would relish an opportunity to sit with you and work out what a rural development policy for Northern Ireland really could be.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I am sure that other members will agree that we will be more than happy to do that. We wanted to get you in for a briefing — we wanted all organisations in, even before Brexit — because we plan to have a strategic planning day, and we needed to know what your priorities were so that we could prioritise the right things. You can take reassurance that your priorities will be the Committee's priorities. We want to know the priorities of all the groups so that we can make sure that the things that we prioritise are what matters to the organisations and groups and not what we personally believe should be the priorities. We need it to be evidence-based. Thank you very much.

Ms Clifford: Thanks very much.