



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Online Communications:
Department of Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

6 October 2016

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 William Irwin
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr David Lynch	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Paul McGurnaghan	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Pauline Rooney	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I welcome Paul McGurnaghan from the digital services division, and Pauline Rooney and David Lynch from area-based schemes division. I apologise that you have been delayed for so long. One of our presentations ran over quite a bit. With that in mind, we will have to keep questions and responses limited. I apologise for that.

Ms Pauline Rooney (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): That is OK. Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to come and talk to you about this equality impact assessment (EQIA). I will give you a short outline of our proposal and then answer the questions that you asked us in June.

We have been promoting the use of online services for several years, including the online application process for common agricultural policy (CAP) area-based schemes. Moving more services online is a government-wide initiative and was part of the last Programme for Government. We believe that online provides a number of benefits for our customers and the Department including faster payments, fewer errors and financial penalties, more accurate data, the reduced risk of disallowance and reduced administration costs.

Online services have been provided alongside more traditional methods such as paper applications. However, we now wish to make online the primary way of communicating and doing business with our customers. It does not mean that we will provide services only online but it does mean that online will be the default position. We will strongly encourage all customers to use online services rather than the alternatives.

In addition to the benefits I outlined, there are a couple of other reasons why we wish to do this now. First, the EU Commission requires applications for its area-based schemes to be made using a geo-spatial aid application. That means online. The targets are 25% of the land claimed in 2016, 75% in 2017, and 100% by 2018. We achieved 62% of online applications in 2016, which covered 70% of the land claimed. However, the 75% target, and particularly the 100% target, will be challenges to meet.

Secondly, recent budget constraints and the voluntary exit scheme in the Civil Service mean that we no longer have the number of staff required to manually process 25,000-plus applications each year and retain a good payment performance. We must look at ways in which we can continue to fulfil our duties within the budget and staff applications that we have.

We understand that moving to online is likely to have an impact on our customers and, potentially, our staff. We have therefore carried out this EQIA to identify who may face negative impacts.

Public consultation was carried out between November 2015 and February 2016, with 260 responses received. As the final stage in consultation, we are asking you for your views. We provided you with a written briefing in June and you responded with questions that you wanted addressed at this oral briefing. I will cover them now.

You asked about the availability of broadband Internet in rural areas. The latest data available shows that approximately 80% of the farm businesses we do business with have access to landline broadband above two megabits per second, which is considered to represent good coverage. As our online services can operate from 0.5 megabits per second, it suggests that a significant majority of customers will be able to access our online services. In addition, the 2015 Ofcom market report states that mobile broadband access is available to over 99% of all premises in Northern Ireland, though it is acknowledged that it can be patchy in rural areas. Satellite broadband is available anywhere in Northern Ireland.

You also asked about the impact on certain groups of farmers as well as the ageing profile of farmers. The EQIA identifies several groups of customers that we anticipate may face differential impacts. They are as follows: Catholic and nationalist customers; older customers; married, unmarried and widowed customers; customers with a disability, and customers with dependants. We have developed mitigating policies to address the impacts and have divided them into three categories: help to get online; help to use online, and alternatives to online. We will help our customers to get online by continuing to work with other Departments to invest in and promote broadband in rural areas. We will help people to use online by designing our online systems to make them easier and provide advice and support helplines for customers. We will also provide training for customers in the use of computers. We will continue to provide alternative methods to online for customers who are unable to use it. This will include paper forms, guidance as well as face-to-face contact with staff in DAERA Direct offices.

With regard to accessing and filling out single application forms in DAERA Direct offices, we plan to have arrangements in place to ensure that customers can use computers in these locations and that staff will be available to assist them. We are also exploring arrangements for support in local libraries.

Finally, you asked what is happening elsewhere. In Wales, like here, the authorities there have been promoting online for several years. From 2016, Wales has made online the premier channel for the single application form, with digital assessments for customers to go online. Wales achieved 99.9% of all applications online this year, with only 15 paper applications for customers with particular difficulties. In Scotland, approximately 76% of single application forms were completed online in 2016. Scotland also provides digital assistance for customers to assist them with applying. In England, the level of online applications was over 80% in 2016 and in the Republic of Ireland, 78% of single application forms were completed online in 2016. I understand that the authorities there are considering what further steps they will take to achieve the online targets established by the Commission. Thank you for giving me your time. I am happy to take any questions that you have and I and my colleagues will seek to answer them.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you and I apologise again that we are time-restricted. I want to highlight your response that broadband services are widely available. You mentioned satellite, but unfortunately, it is extremely expensive and not always very good. I would love to know the statistics for, "widely available", because in my constituency, it is the single most consistent issue that my constituents raise with me and there are large areas with little or no broadband access. The statistics that the Economy Minister mentioned in the Chamber recently were based on areas across the North, not the rural areas. We are a rural Committee — that is our focus — so I would like statistics for rural

constituencies rather than an average for the North as a whole, because we can be fairly certain that our big cities and major town centres are going to have fairly good access to broadband, but people there are highly unlikely to be the ones who are filling in forms for the Department.

Ms Rooney: Yes.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): That is not an attack on you, but I think that, sometimes, we need to be careful about the statistics that we use. I am not even expecting you to respond to that now, because you would not have those statistics here today and that is fair enough; however, I would appreciate it if the Department could come back to us at some stage with the information. I am happy to take it in written form and Stella can take it from the Department.

Mr Paul McGurnaghan (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The 80% was an analysis that we did on farm businesses, so we matched actual farm businesses with the BT information to the telegraph pole; that is where the 80% figure came from. We are content that it does represent an accurate figure for the availability of broadband to the pole —

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): For farm businesses.

Mr McGurnaghan: As I said last time, some farms may be located a significant distance from the pole, so it could be two or three hops and the signal would degrade the further you go from the distribution pole. The figure of 80% for farm businesses should be accurate. That still leaves a substantial proportion who do not have it and I know that this is extremely annoying for them, but the analysis is rural and the 80% figure is based on farm businesses. The latest Ofcom statistics, which are broken down between urban and rural suggest that there has been a significant improvement to 2016 and they state that 87% of rural premises should have access to fixed line broadband.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I know that a programme is being rolled out for anybody with under 15 megabits and that is to be welcomed. I sincerely hope that they target it to the right place, because I am not necessarily blaming the Department. I know that the Department has had its challenges in the past in getting these programmes to actually target where they are most needed. It is not the Department at fault, but it is the Department that needs to take it into consideration when doing this.

Ms Archibald: Thank you for your presentation. It seems that a lot of things are being put in place to help people access the online services. I have one or two very quick questions. The figure is 99.9% for Wales and some other areas with really good uptake. Even in the South, it is 78%, and I suppose that some areas there have similar challenges regarding broadband. Are there lessons for us to pick up from that?

Ms Rooney: Absolutely.

Ms Archibald: My other question is this: when you say that paper forms will still be available for people, is that as a last resort? Will they have to prove that they cannot access the form online? I know that people can access computers in the DAERA Direct offices. That is very welcome, but are paper forms an absolute last resort?

Ms Rooney: Absolutely, we want to learn lessons from people who have done this before and have gained a degree of success. We have been talking to our Welsh colleagues about what they did, particularly through the digital assistance model, and how that support worked for them, to learn from that and, essentially, repeat the good things.

We will be encouraging farmers to go online, and when we have moved to online as the primary channel, the form will be designed to be used online. Paper may not be as easy to use in the future. If somebody cannot use the online form, we will provide support to help them. If they say, "No, I really want paper", that will be available.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for your presentation. I have a difficulty with your statistics on broadband. The topography of rural areas is such that if you have a farm on a hill you might get broadband whereas your neighbour half a mile away in the valley might not. I do not think it is fair just to take parts of Northern Ireland and say, "That area has broadband; therefore everybody living in that area has broadband."

My other point is that we are generating a faceless society. Yesterday, when I would have met the milkman, I would have said, "Don't forget an extra pint for Saturday". Now, you have to fill an online form for that. It is getting a wee bit beyond a joke. I am not a great fan of social media, as I am sure you will gather. You run the danger of having a faceless society, where nobody knows anybody and everything is done online. As long as the computer is working, everything is fine. It reminds me of a sketch in 'Little Britain' in which "The computer says no". I am not 100% behind what you are saying, but if it creates efficiencies, so be it.

One of the efficiencies that you are trying to establish is in staff. At a later date, I would like to know the staffing levels you have at the moment and the staffing levels you will have when you get to 80% and 100%.

Ms Rooney: The online application form for farmers is beneficial in a number of ways. We have been able to build checks into it, which means that there are fewer mistakes. This has been critical to our ability to process forms faster and get to the point where we can make payments faster. We can only continue to build on that. The more forms done online, the more efficient we can be. That is good for farmers. The fewer processing mistakes that we have to deal with the better, because they take up staff time. Staff can then do other things that are equally important.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the fact that you are pushing to get as many applications online as possible. I know that there are issues around broadband. What percentage of applicants — I know that it is quite high — uses professional form fillers who automatically do it online for them?

Ms Rooney: Gosh, I cannot remember what it is.

Mr Irwin: I would have thought the percentage was quite high.

Ms Rooney: I think it was about 50:50. It is a while since I looked at that statistic, William, but I will go back and check it.

Mr McGurnaghan: We can provide you with the exact figure, but it is in the 60s. The majority of forms submitted online are done by form fillers.

Mr Irwin: I would have thought so. At the end of the day, it makes it easier. One big plus for me is in duplicate fields: people are notified. For the life of me, I cannot understand why that could not happen from 2005 until now. It meant millions in fines to farmers in Northern Ireland. Yes, you have to welcome something when it happens. It is very good. Those situations could happen so easily, and you can ask why they happen, but it only takes one. In normal situations, the problem was that the guy who owned the land did not realise it and, even though he knew that he had told the farmer to claim it, he claimed for it too, not knowing that he did not need to do that. You would wonder why, but it happens.

Mr McGurnaghan: Once you have the majority of people going online, it offers the opportunity to do duplicate claim checking. I know that the Committee was pushing for that and it was one of the things that we introduced this year. It becomes a big advantage only when the majority of people are online. Where you have small numbers online and most on paper you would not be able to pick it up online. The more people who get online —

Mr Irwin: It makes it easier.

Mr McGurnaghan: — it makes it much more likely that we are going to pick up nearly every duplicate claim and notify farmers right away. It is a big advantage.

Mr Irwin: There is absolutely no doubt that that has been a big advantage to farmers this year. It is nice to be positive sometimes. I know it is not easy from all applicants' point of view, but if there is a will to do it there is a way. If you encourage that, it will bring benefits that hopefully everyone will get.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I agree with William about that. If people are getting the right support to be able to do it, and if it is a better way of doing it, that is what we all want to see. We want to see better outcomes at the end of the day.

Mr McGurnaghan: It is important that we listen to the user engagement. The Committee came up with a number of useful suggestions, as did form fillers, which we have implemented into the new application for 2016. We will be doing the same for 2017. More than 97% of people who started the application in 2016 completed it online. That completion rate is very high and the overall rating is four stars out of five. There was very good feedback from people who had used it.

Our challenge is to help people who have access to broadband to make the jump to digital. We recognise that some people need that support, but there is another category of people that does not have access and there are different measures that we need to put in place there as well. There are different levels of support that we can apply to different people who fall into those categories so that they can use the system. We need to make sure that the system is easier to use and gets easier to use. We will continue to add benefits to online so that people find it easier each time to use it. Our target is to design applications that can be used first time unaided. That is something that we have been striving for. We welcome any feedback that would help us to improve the online service.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I would not mind going through it to see how it is done and see how difficulties arise. I know that there is a fear factor, speaking as someone who is a wee bit technologically challenged. I can understand that there is that thing that holds you back sometimes.

Ms Rooney: We can arrange that for the whole Committee. The new 2017 form would be the best one to show you. It will be a wee while away yet before you can see it.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): There is no problem with that.

Ms Rooney: We could arrange for the Committee to have a presentation on the new form. It will probably be closer to Christmas, because we are just starting to develop it.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): That is fair enough, thank you.

Mr Anderson: Pauline, I know that we are moving towards that end result of, hopefully, 100%. However, I still have a concern about those who for different reasons lack training, access to broadband or whatever. I am concerned about the level of support that they will get. Someone could ring the Department and say that they are struggling with this, that and the other, but are told that most of the applications are now done online. I am worried about the level of support. I think you talked about using libraries. You say here that:

"The agreements would likely include Libraries' staff assisting customers".

Using words such as "likely" and all this is getting away from it instead of being serious. How serious are you about saying that the people who really need help and support to go online will be given that support? That is the only way that you will encourage people in future, alongside better broadband.

Ms Rooney: You are right, Sydney. People will need different levels of support and we need to provide support at all those levels. Some people might just need somebody on the end of the phone to tell them what to do. Somebody might need a bit more than that or might need training. Somebody else might need to come into an office or a library. We have not formally organised it with Libraries NI, so that is why it says "likely". If the libraries' staff are trained to take people through that, then that is what we propose to do in offices for people who needed that support.

We would probably have to set up an appointments system. There is no point in 10 people arriving all at once, because this is something that takes quite a bit of time. That is something that we would probably do to make sure that there was enough time to take the applicant through what was needed to fill in the form. Once we get the EQIA completed, that is the next stage that we will move to. We want to get definite plans in place to support people in completing these forms.

Mr Poots: I have to declare an interest in this, because I claim a single farm payment. I have to confess that I have always done it on a paper form up to this point. However, I will do it on the computer this year. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Anderson: Without training?

Mr Poots: Without training. The reason why I always did it on paper is quite simple; I could walk into the DARD office and ask someone to look it over to see that I had ticked the right boxes. I always did it that way because the EU was so punitive on farmers who made, very often, small but genuine errors. If there is a system that backs a farmer up, so that if a mistake is made it is brought to their attention, I have absolutely no problem going to the system. It was just a safety net, in my instance.

I would like to take things a bit further. I know that you have a registration system for livestock births and deaths but where are we on livestock movements? Beef farmers, in particular, could be bringing in 200 or 300 cattle a year, or they could be bringing in 1,000 cattle a year, and moving the same number again. Can you currently scan that and email it as opposed to using paper forms that go back and forward? If you can, what is being done to encourage farmers to do it? I leave forms in and they go back and forward and nobody ever says that I can do this on the computer.

Ms Rooney: Edwin, I do not know the answer. Do you, Paul?

Mr McGurnaghan: Yes, you can do it on computer. The advanced movements from slaughter to marts can be done. Farm-to-farm movements are less easy because of the sticker from the buyer and the seller.

Mr Poots: Surely, you can scan that on to your phone or take a photograph of the form using your phone and email it. You are looking to be progressive in all these things and to —

Mr McGurnaghan: Absolutely, I totally agree. The process with the stickers does not make that easy. Veterinary service is currently looking at how it could be changed so that you do not even need to —

Mr Poots: But the photograph is there. You have the photograph of the sticker on the form.

Mr McGurnaghan: Under the new proposals you would not need that. It would be on their smartphone so you would not need to take a photograph and put it onto a smartphone. It would be there and you could download it directly without having to do that. We are looking at how that process —

Mr Poots: What are you doing in terms of opportunities for extending this? It is grand doing the single farm payment form, but there are an awful lot of other forms that farmers have to fill in.

Mr McGurnaghan: Our target is for 80% of all those forms to be online by 2020 as well.

Mr Poots: How are you getting the message out? You are certainly doing it for the single farm payment but how are you getting the message out for the other things?

Mr McGurnaghan: We engaged with the farmers' union a couple of weeks ago. It is going to come back with suggestions on improvements that we could make to the animal and public health information system (APHIS) online service, which is part of the migration to Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS) online. There will be significant improvements in those. Sixty-three per cent of birth registrations are made online. There are small number of movements because the process does not really suit. That is an area that we are actively looking at.

Mr Poots: The suspicion is that if you got most of us to the place, you would not want to go back.

Mr McGurnaghan: People do not go back.

Mr Poots: They do not go back. It is all worth a massive drive to progress this, particularly in the current circumstances where you have fewer staff.

Mr Swann: Thank you, folks. I am sorry that I missed your presentation but I did read it. You talk about support and encouragements and benefits. You are not, then, going to go down the line of penalties and punishments for retaining paper forms.

Ms Rooney: No. We will get to the stage where the only people who do not complete their forms online are the people who cannot do so. The regulation allows us to support them in getting their form done for them.

Mr Swann: Let us look at it the other way, Pauline. I think in the young farmers' application the last time round you got 10 extra points for filling it in online. The people who could not fill it in online saw that as a penalty rather than a benefit.

Ms Rooney: It does not apply to direct payments.

Mr Swann: Right, so you get nothing. I am thinking about other forms further down the line.

Ms Rooney: My area is area-based schemes rather than —

Mr Swann: I am thinking about online systems.

Ms Rooney: Yes, and it certainly has worked as an incentive to get people to apply online for other schemes. That is a good thing. The more you can do online, the faster we get it and can process it and the more likely it is that the information that is provided there — because you can build checks into it — is right rather than wrong. This reduces a lot of the queries generated from getting a series of forms which slow down the application process because you have to do a lot of toing and froing. That is one of the benefits that will develop from it all.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you very much for your presentation. We really appreciate it.