



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and  
Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Future Rural Development Strategy: Rural  
Community Network, Rural Action and  
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network

26 November 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)  
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Clare Bailey  
Mrs Rosemary Barton  
Mr John Blair  
Mr Maurice Bradley  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Patsy McGlone

**Witnesses:**

Ms Louise Coyle	Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
Ms Teresa Cavanan	Rural Action
Mr Aidan Campbell	Rural Community Network

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I welcome, via StarLeaf, Louise Coyle, the director of the NI Rural Women's Network; Aidan Campbell, a policy officer in the Rural Community Network (RCN); and Teresa Cavanan, the CEO of Rural Action. I ask the representatives to commence their presentations. When you are finished, we will ask questions.

Louise, Aidan and Teresa, you are very welcome. If whoever wants to go first can kick off. You can agree among yourselves.

**Mr Aidan Campbell (Rural Community Network):** Teresa, are you going to kick off?

**Ms Teresa Cavanan (Rural Action):** Thank you, Chair and Committee, for the invite. There is a bit of an echo. I can hear myself.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** We are not picking up an echo, Teresa. It is probably very disorientating for you. Is there something that we need to do here? Maybe turn something off? We can hear you 100%.

**Ms Cavanan:** OK. I will just keep talking.

**The Committee Clerk:** Do you want to see if anybody else can step in?

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Louise or Aidan, can you pick it up until Teresa gets sorted out?

**Mr Campbell:** Yes, if you want. Can you hear me all right, Chair?

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Yes, we can hear you. Your photograph is a bit pixilated, but we can hear you all right.

**Mr Campbell:** I am on a very bad broadband connection at home. Hopefully, you will be able to hear me.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** One hundred per cent.

**Mr Campbell:** Teresa is obviously having difficulties with StarLeaf. I am getting "unstable network connection", so just bear with me a minute.

Teresa was going to do the introduction, but I will pick it up. I thank the Committee for the invite. We are responding to what DAERA officials have just said, so our points will be general reactions or comments, and then I will talk about the general principles on how we see future rural development policy. If the technology holds up, it might then be more useful to open up for questions and answers or a general discussion.

All three of our organisations were involved in subgroups in the co-production process. Rural Action and Rural Community Network co-facilitated the engagement day in Loughry in January. Three or four members of the Committee were there that day, and we had a good and fruitful discussion. We had a discussion about some of these issues with the Committee previously on 14 February this year in an evidence session on the UK Agriculture Bill. Teresa was going to make some points, but I will make a couple of points and then hand over to Louise, and, by that stage, Teresa's connection will maybe have come back in.

In the previous programme, lots of groups ruled themselves out of the rural development programme (RDP) due to the need for match funding, the need to be a company limited by guarantee or the need to put in their own resources at risk. From our point of view and from the point of view of grassroots groups, we need to ensure that whatever schemes are developed out of our new rural development policy framework are as user-friendly as they can be, and we need to build up skills and confidence among groups to enable them to apply and simplify the applications processes as much as we can. Otherwise, there is a risk that funding will go to the groups that have drawn down RDP in previous programmes and have attained a certain level of expertise, and the other groups that have not been part of those processes will get left further behind because they still will not feel that this is a programme to which they can apply.

We are keen that any new programme is on a multi-year budget so that officials and communities can plan rural development in a more strategic way. A key question for rural stakeholders is: where will the budget come from and what will the timeline be? We can have a really good co-produced rural development policy framework with great ideas about innovative programmes and schemes, but, if there is no money or very little money to fund it, there will be difficulties.

The Chancellor referred to the UK shared prosperity fund yesterday in the spending review announcement, and we have been led to believe that the vast majority of rural development funding will come from that fund as a replacement for EU funding. The Chancellor announced that, in 2021-22, there are proposed to be UK shared prosperity fund pilot programmes across the UK to the tune of £220 million, but there was not a whole lot more detail in the spending review. More detail will be made available in the spring, but it looks like the full programme will not be in place until April 2022, so there is a legitimate fear of a gap in funding at a difficult time, as the economy deals with the impacts of the pandemic plus the end of the Brexit transition period.

From a rural perspective, we believe that it is important that the UK shared prosperity fund includes a ring-fenced pot for rural development, as it is a fund that will potentially cover a lot of priorities, and our fear is that rural development funding could get lost in it. The last RDP had a substantial funding commitment from our Executive funds, and, hopefully, our Executive will be able to step up to that in the new rural policy development framework. However, an expectation has been created in the mind

of the public and of stakeholders that any replacement funding for EU structural fund programmes will be at least at the same level as in the previous programme.

Those are all my comments. I will hand over to Louise now, and, hopefully, you will be able to go back to Teresa at the end. Louise, do you want to jump in there?

**Ms Louise Coyle (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network):** Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you all this morning. Declan raised one of the issues that I have, and that is the need to retain the principle of community-led local development and input from local communities on spending decisions, as well as all the programme design and evaluation as we move ahead. Whatever structures emerge need to take women's involvement and representation seriously. Numerous successive rural development programmes have all highlighted that there is an issue with targeting women. This new programme, being indigenous, is an opportunity to redress that. Obviously, the issue of rural women is my area, but I would say that the same has been true for young people. They have consistently been a target group, yet you will all know that they have not really been targeted. They are called a target group because they are under-represented beneficiaries of the programme. We need to make sure that rural women and young people are not excluded as we move ahead with the new programme.

Declan raised this point, and Aidan touched on it. On the UK shared prosperity fund, all EU structural funds had a cross-border element. We need to ensure that that is retained by Westminster and that it takes account of cross-border learning.

DAERA needs to consider the other stakeholders who are needed around the table during co-production. In fact, that applies not only to DAERA but to all of you as MLAs when different programmes are happening. As a stakeholder, I hear a lot about co-production and co-design. My experience is that the way in which that happens varies greatly not only from programme to programme but from Department to Department. There needs to be a more cohesive and transparent process for co-production and co-design.

It will be very important in a detailed scheme to hear from a diverse range of voices and experiences. I know that there was some start to the programme. It was great to have a huge room full of people in Loughry. It was a huge room, and there was quite a bit of diversity there. I am not sure that that is how it started out. I know that officials will probably disagree with me on that. Although we were on those stakeholder groups, we had to ask for a space at them. We were not included, yet women are a target group. We are the only regional organisation with a remit for rural women, yet we did not automatically get an invite. Really, when co-design is happening, those things need to be looked at.

If equality is to be a cross-cutting, horizontal principle in the programme, it needs to be built in from the very beginning. My concern is that, when there is pressure on spend, pressure for delivery or pressure to meet targets, the equality principles always drop off. We are seeing that with the current programme. We have a monitoring committee meeting scheduled for tomorrow — the first in a very long time. We know that we are living through a pandemic, and these have been difficult times. There has not been an equality and good relations subgroup meeting in advance of that. That is the practice, but it has not happened. We have been told that no figures will be available tomorrow on the equality monitoring of the programme. I am just putting it out there that, if we want to do things better in the future, we need to learn from how they have been done in the past. We always need to do things better. I know that Fiona is a gender champion, and I hope that that will make a difference to women's engagement in the programme.

We know that the future rural policy framework will be developed in the coming months. I want to make this appeal to the Committee. Our citizens and members are concerned about that immediate gap come 1 January 2021. We need to know how the Department and the Executive will communicate with citizens about what the immediate impacts are likely to be. I would like to know what scenario planning the Department and the Executive have done on the potential outcomes on day one of our exit from the EU. Maybe day one is not the day that we need to worry about. Maybe it is two months in, when things really start to pile up. I do not know, but I would like to be able to support our membership. I know that Aidan and Teresa are the same. In order to help the citizens for whom we deliver, we need the information and support. There will probably need to be some resourcing and funding from the Executive in order to deal with that. I know that it is very difficult and is probably a scenario-planning issue when things are still not settled this far into the transition period. However, people still need guidance about how the end of that period will affect them in five weeks' time. That is my appeal to you. I know that it is not directly linked to the programme. However, it is linked directly to

rural citizens, and this is our opportunity to raise it with the Committee. Those are my remarks. I hope that Teresa is there now.

**Ms Cavanan:** I think so, Louise. I think that I have managed to solve the problem. Sorry about that, folks. I am not sure what happened there.

Thanks very much to the Chair and the Committee for the invitation. I am not sure how much Aidan said when I could not hear. I will just reiterate a few points about the future rural development policy. I will start by saying that we have noted the references to broadband this morning. On that note, we want to acknowledge the recent announcement about the rural broadband project and the commencement of works. The current pandemic has, in many ways, highlighted the importance of good connectivity and the very real challenges and difficulties in areas where there is poor coverage. We are pleased to hear about the progress on the project. I will echo members' comments that it is very important that it reaches those who are most in need.

I will also say at the outset that we fully support members' comments about planning, sustaining communities, farm diversification, cooperation and LEADER. I do not want to go over everything that may have been said previously. It is important to acknowledge that the process keeps moving. We look forward to an inclusive consultation process so that we can provide some longevity to the rural development programme and move away from short-term or annual budgets. It is important that we use the time now to support communities and businesses to become investment-ready. We believe that those themes provide scope to meet the current and emerging needs. We wish to ensure that flexibility is maintained to adapt and develop priorities that are based on need at any particular time.

We would also like to see fewer restrictions on capital and revenue allocations. We welcome the opportunity to test and learn from pilots and new innovative approaches, and suggest that that will require a review of how we assess risk. Obviously, with innovation, there comes a leap of faith. Therefore, we need to consider our attitude to risk and be prepared to try new approaches.

To touch base again on that point about groups being ready for the investment, I think that we have time now with the policy being developed to address some of the challenges that communities face in getting shovel-ready or investment-ready. We are keen to ensure that we use whatever time we have between now and seeing a fully resourced policy and programme to support rural groups, communities and businesses to be ready. That will require investment in project animation and development support.

At the early stage of the pandemic, we saw a huge volunteer effort across a wide range of grassroots community organisations in how they responded to the immediate hardship. We want to look at how we could develop programmes to harness and enhance that, what we can learn from that immediate response, and how we can address some of the challenges and, indeed, opportunities that will arise out of that. In that regard, we look forward to working with the Department on responding to the DAERA consultation and putting forward ideas for future programmes and schemes in the context of the priorities that are outlined.

I think that Aidan may have mentioned at the outset that both we and the RCN had a role in the engagement day and supporting the workshop. We are very supportive of the broad thrust of the framework and, obviously, now want to see it come to fruition. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Teresa, Louise and Aidan, for attending and giving those very good presentations. Before I move round the room, can you give us a sense from each of your three groups of the most salient and important elements that you would like to see in a future programme? What is the most important overarching element that you would like to see included in a future programme?

**Ms Cavanan:** Is it OK if I start?

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Yes.

**Ms Cavanan:** The framework is designed to look at social, economic and environmental aspects and there are important elements to all that. As we move out of the pandemic, we will need to consider employability, particularly for our young people. We will need to look at how we can create rural areas that are sustainable and attractive to rural young people. Health and well-being and social development are also important elements.

Declan, if we are to have thriving sustainable communities, we need to take forward aspects of all the strands. We are keen to look at the employment strand and working with young people, as well as community infrastructure and supporting the valuable work of volunteers. We will want to take forward a long list of issues from the strategy.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Louise or Aidan, is there anything that you would like to add to that?

**Ms Coyle:** I will come in. Aidan is having some broadband issues but I think that he can hear us. I agree with everything that Teresa said. It is about how we ensure that people can continue to live, work and thrive in our rural communities. The current themes are a very good start to that, and they are all interlinked. You cannot have really great community spaces or great businesses without rural broadband, but our priority is to sustain the community infrastructure that is so important to people in rural communities.

We probably have quite a lot of buildings, but we need to look at how those are staffed and how people are supported in delivering a service in community hubs across rural Northern Ireland. Some areas may need capital builds, but, by and large, we are doing pretty well with physical spaces. However, as Rosemary touched on, we would like to see long-term maintenance and investment in the things that are already working. COVID has shone a light on all the difficulties that we may experience in rural areas, such as broadband and poverty, and has highlighted issues that we already knew about. Government needed local groups in order to deliver their funding and support to alleviate COVID-19. My biggest priority is maintaining and retaining that, and being ambitious for the future so that our young people have jobs, and they want to stay and grow in the areas from which they come.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you very much, Louise. We will move on to Clare. Clare, can you hear me? OK. We will get Clare in a wee minute. John, you are next on the list.

**Mr Blair:** Thank you, Chair. I thank Teresa, Louise and Aidan. It is good to see you again.

You may have heard me earlier at the departmental presentation asking about an interdepartmental approach and whether that could be sustained as plans develop on rural provision. However, more specifically on the interdepartmental issue, do you think that the visibility of a cross-departmental approach is necessary? Are arm's-length bodies from other Departments visible? We assume, correctly, that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has a significant rural role. I am keen to know how much you see of other Departments and their agencies — for example, the Arts Council or Sport NI. Are they delivering through the rural network, and are those organisations visible at a local rural level?

On the subject of diversity, I am keen to know whether the Executive Office community relations budget and its programmes extend to rural communities. In my opinion, those programmes are often targeted at two communities rather than all communities. I am keen that diversity is addressed in rural areas. Very often, representative groups are based in Belfast and Derry. I am keen to know how we address the needs of our minority communities — people from different ethnic backgrounds, the LGBT community and others — in rural areas. I am very keen to hear your feedback on that.

**Ms Cavanan:** I will start on the question about diversity. Were Aidan still with us, he could better articulate the work that the Rural Community Network does with the Community Relations Council, particularly Charmain, on good relations and community relations across rural Northern Ireland. The PEACE PLUS programme was mentioned in this morning's earlier session, and, with the exception of more recent Peace programmes, there has always been, in the form of a rural intermediary funding body, a dedicated focus on rural peace and reconciliation and cross-border relations. I feel that rural communities have, in some way, lost out by not having that strategic or dedicated pot of funding that they had in more recent programmes. So, it was encouraging to hear the Department talking about its engaging again with the PEACE PLUS programme. Hopefully, that will encourage greater diversity in rural areas and create an opportunity for communities to get involved in good relations work again.

Cross-border relations, especially for those who live and work in border areas, are also vital. Declan mentioned that when talking about cooperation. Work is being done out there. We are involved in work with the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), and that work very much involves addressing diversity, working with both communities and working on a cross-border basis. There is always room for improvement, and there is always additional support that can be given to work with rural communities and rural people.

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks a million for your follow-up presentation. You made a number of interesting points. I am looking at the membership of the subgroups, and I want to pick up on what Louise was saying about having actively to ask to be included in the process. You point to the lack of women on the working group and to the needs of rural women and young people. The Rural Women's Network was not included in the employment or innovation and enterprise subgroups, for example, but you were part of the connectivity subgroup. I concede that Rural Action was on the well-being subgroup, but Invest NI and Tourism NI were on the innovation subgroup. The colleges and, again, Invest NI were on the employment subgroup. Did you have to select one to be on? Were you offered a place on or input into all of the subgroups? This links into what Teresa was saying about trying to get groups or projects shovel-ready. How far were you allowed to be included in the process? What kind of project readiness does there need to be? What would that look like, and what kind of resource and efforts would need to be put into that?

**Ms Coyle:** Our experience was that I do not think that we were being deliberately excluded. I did not get that feeling. That is why it is so important to have the co-design and co-production process in place internally so that, no matter what is being discussed at a region-wide level on behalf of the Department, the key stakeholders are there. We get funding from the Department of Agriculture, so it recognises us as a key actor and stakeholder. We have 300 member groups and about 400 individual members. Ideally, had I known that this was coming down the line, not only would I have been getting myself and my staff ready to sit on these groups but I would have been getting our member groups ready to sit on them. That did not happen. They were up and running before I knew about it. I did not get to the very first meeting of that connectivity group, and my calendar was such that it was the only group that I could commit to. I tried to get on to the isolation one as well, but it just did not work out. Again, it was not an issue of being actively excluded. When I asked to be on it, that was not a problem. The process is the problem. The Rural Women's Network was missed. It was not deliberate but it highlights to me a vast issue with the process when an enterprise of this nature is started. Your first question has to be, "Who is in the room?", and your next question has to be, "Who is not in the room?". It is a question to ask even those participants who are there. Do not assume on day one that you have got everything right and that there is not someone else who should be included. It goes back to the previous question, in that other statutory agencies, such as Invest NI, are in at the beginning of these projects. They get a steer on what rural people need so that they do invest in our rural communities and do see the value of what needs to be done. I have no issue with those people being in the room at all; it is vital that they are there. Historically, the assumption has been that DAERA does rural, so the rest of the Departments and agencies do not need to worry about it. Obviously, that is not the case, and I hope that the Rural Needs Act will start to play a bigger role in that.

Sorry, I cannot remember what your other question was, Clare, because I did not write it down.

**Ms Bailey:** You are all right; I think that it was aimed more at Teresa. The question was about being project ready, and it links into what you were saying. It is about starting at the right place and having the right people in the room talking about everything. At the start of the session, Aidan mentioned that some pilot projects are up and running. What are we supporting and driving forward? For other projects that could be moving forward, what resources and work are needed to get them ready to tap into that?

**Ms Cavanan:** I mentioned investment readiness, which is all about generating ideas, trying to realise the potential of communities and innovating to support them in identifying the need for their project and articulating that in an application process. Project development is important. We have heard a lot of talk about planning. Many projects require planning, and a lot of work goes into early-stage design. There are also financial issues such as how to sustain the project and securing match funding. RCN is currently involved in providing pre-application support to the social enterprise pilot. Already, we are seeing organisations coming forward that have the potential and really good ideas, but they may just lack the capacity to move forward into the application process. Therefore, it is about trying to harness what is out there and working with the communities to get them to the stage where they have a project that is capable of being invested in. It requires effort. Sometimes, people think that you can go straight from a project idea to the application form. There are a lot of things in between. However, if supported, that should generate much more sustainable projects. It is important to see project development and support as an output in itself, and we think that it is integral to any funding programme moving forward. It is about focusing not only on the grant process but on the pre-development stages.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Teresa and Louise. Can you hear me, Patsy?

**Mr McGlone:** Yes. Sorry, my computer went down. Forgive me if I missed a bit, and thank you for your contributions. My query is specifically on policy development. I do not know whether you were listening to the earlier session, in which we asked the Department about different aspects of policy. I wanted to ask you about rural isolation and how things have changed and, probably, been exacerbated by COVID-19. What sort of solutions or opportunities do you see and with which organisations? They all attended the stakeholder event at Loughry in January, but it is now a matter of how things have changed and how we need to adapt. Some things will be adapted — temporarily, we hope — until vaccines are rolled out and society becomes a safer place. However, other things will, probably, have changed permanently. How can we develop that? What opportunities might there be? What voyage do you see for policies that could be developed for rural development?

**Ms Cavanan:** I reiterate points already raised about the need to support community infrastructure and the role of volunteers, especially when we are looking at rural isolation. There is also the built infrastructure and the valuable contribution that rural, church and community halls play in encouraging people to get out to activities. We are in a different position at the minute, but those communities have put a lot of effort into still trying to connect with their rural residents throughout the pandemic. There is definitely scope for that.

In the earlier session, Patsy, you mentioned domiciliary care. I have mentioned employability. I cannot but think back to the ACE schemes that ran in rural and urban areas many years ago. There is potential for assisted community enterprises or employment to support those in rural isolation and help older people to remain in their homes.

We might need to rethink our needs and how we can give people in rural communities a purpose. Maybe we need to look at some of what happened in the past, join that up better for the future and create opportunities for young people to develop new skills. Maybe those skills could be tied in with their community infrastructure, by maintaining community halls etc. There are loads of opportunities but those are the key things that we might need to look at in addressing rural isolation.

**Ms Coyle:** I echo Teresa's support for something similar to the ACE scheme. In addressing isolation and giving people a purpose, people become invested in their community again. When you have been the recipient of the value of community infrastructure and support, you continue investing in it for the rest of your life. That is why we are all involved in that. There is real opportunity in people feeling a part of the space in which they live.

One thing that has changed as a result of COVID is the use of space, whether that is the distribution of food and support or the inability to use space, with people unable to come together and meet as they did before. Our member groups are really feeling that difference. We are providing a lot of things online for our groups to fill that gap. I will not go down the road of talking about broadband, other than saying that it works only if you have that facility.

COVID has reminded communities how dynamic they are, how capable they are of doing things at speed in their community and how their local knowledge is vital. I made the point earlier — I do not know whether you caught it, Patsy — that it is all very well government having interventions to support a crisis but they needed the groups on the ground to deliver them, inform them and back them up. There is a huge opportunity to build on that reconnection between government and people.

My experience with our members is that people are absolutely struggling with their mental health. There has been a definite shift even from the early stages of the pandemic, when people thought that there would be an end. We are now in a different time of year with different weather. Poverty and economics are also coming into play, as is the pressure that people are feeling economically. That is a key, emerging need not just for the Agriculture Department but for all Departments and the Executive.

**Mr McGlone:** I will pick up on the issue of mental health. We were talking about the ACE schemes. I know that the ACE schemes worked well in some places and not so well in others. However, by and large, they were supportive. Work was done around pensioners' homes, with people with disabilities and with the vulnerable. Access to services, including mental health services, will probably be curtailed for the foreseeable future. Telemedicine can be OK in some cases but not so good in others. I am just throwing this out there: have you done any work, even initial tick-tacking work, with the trusts to see whether there is a further role for the community and voluntary sector to provide support? It may be providing additional training for volunteers in how to handle and deal with people, especially in the access and connectivity work that, in some instances, they do day and daily when out and about with people. Has any thought been given to how the sector or sectors can work with the trusts? I am



not saying that that should supplant the work of the trusts, because that professional work is necessary, but maybe volunteers could be upskilled to help out that bit more.

**Ms Coyle:** We have certainly had the conversation with the Health Committee on the impacts, Patsy, although maybe not in respect of volunteers, as you are talking about. Another change that we have noticed — I am sure that it is the same for everyone — is that volunteers tend to be of an age. Quite a number of them are retired. They are definitely in the older age bracket, and many are shielding or, at least, being super-careful about protecting themselves. So, the number of available volunteers has reduced. It goes back to Teresa's point: how do we engage younger people in their communities and in volunteering? What kind of incentivisation could we have for that? That is not to say that no young people are doing these things; you know that. It is a generalisation that the age profile of volunteers tends to be at the older end of the spectrum. If we were to do something on upskilling volunteers, and it is a good idea, Patsy, the first issue might be their recruitment.

**Mr McGlone:** OK. Thanks very much for that.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you very much, Louise and Teresa. Funny, I am sitting here using a Girls' Brigade (GB) pen; I do not know why. I thought that it would be wrong of me not to ask this: have you had any input from or conversation with the GB?

**Ms Coyle:** During some periods of the pandemic, we have had almost daily engagement with our members. We have weekly conversations and e-zines go out. We have an engagement officer. She started on 1 April. We were so excited about getting an engagement officer who could be out and about with our groups. Our groups have told us that that is what they want: somebody to be able to see them face to face all the time. She has been doing all of her work by phoning, emailing and video-calling people. The Girls' Brigade is a member group, so, yes, it will have been getting all of our information and support through this period.

**Mr Harvey:** That is great. Thank you. While I am using the pen, it would have been wrong not to ask. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs Barton:** Once upon a time, we had a Women in Agriculture group in Fermanagh. I am sure that you remember it. There is a huge problem in getting funding. That group folded because of the great difficulties in getting funding because it was a ladies' group etc. Is there any way in which such groups could be reformed?

**Ms Coyle:** Rosemary, your area in Fermanagh is one of the key target areas for our engagement officer this year. We are not a funding organisation. We barely survive on the funding that we get. It will come as no surprise to you that rural women get 1.3% of the funding for women that is available from our Executive. There is a huge funding disparity for rural women. It is historical, and it has exactly the impacts that you are talking about. Organisations that provide valuable services are not able to survive. The new rural development programme may want to consider targeting women. It is certainly an issue in rural needs. With no Executive in place for three years, it has been really difficult for us to challenge that underinvestment. To do so would have required creating new policies and making decisions, but there were no Ministers to make them. We now have the COVID pandemic. It is still very difficult to have those conversations because people in the Departments are rightly saying, "This is our priority right now. We will get back to you". Any pressure that the Department can bring to bear would be very welcome. We have the ability to support and develop any new or existing group and connect it even to alternative, non-mainstream funding streams — that is what we do — but we are not a funding organisation. We cannot provide funds, much as we would like to.

**Ms Cavanan:** Rosemary, I reiterate the point that I made earlier about the restrictions between capital and revenue allocations. A group of that nature may have been looking more for revenue funding, and, sometimes, revenue funding is very difficult to secure. I highlight that because, sometimes, there is more capital available, and revenue is where the difficulty rests. The Fermanagh group might have been presented with that challenge.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** No other members have indicated that they want to ask any more questions. I thank Louise, Teresa and Aidan for attending this morning. Thank you for the ongoing great work that your organisations do out there in the community. I am sure that you are looking

forward to the consultation opening so that you and your wider membership can have their say on this important new policy. Thank you very much for coming here this morning. Take care.