

Rural Policy/Rural Proofing in Northern Ireland

Professor Sally Shortall, Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy, Newcastle University sally.shortall@newcastle.ac.uk

Dr Erin Sherry, Senior Economist, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Belfast erin.sherry@afbini.gov.uk

This presentation

- Rural development/ policy Northern Ireland
- Rural proofing/ Rural Needs Act
- Comments and observations

Northern Ireland



The context:
Northern
Ireland and
rural
development/
policy

1990: the first EU Rural Development Programme – DA becomes DARD

Key component in terms of rural communities: the LEADER Programme

Innovative and important socially for rural communities

From the outset a strong emphasis on rural poverty and rural disadvantage

Rural development/ policy

2000s on: rural policies outside of EU RDP

Initially close relationship with the Rural Development Council/ Rural Community Network

Rural proofing

Rural poverty initiatives

Rural Women's Network

The Rural Childcare Programme

Rural development/ policy

Rural Needs Act/ legislated rural proofing

Northern Ireland copied England's rural proofing policy

Introduced in first programme for government in 2002

Reinvigorated and enhanced in 2011

Legislation pushed through by outgoing Minister in run-up to the 2015 election

Rural Needs Act 2016

The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Departments, local government, non-departmental public bodies

- Must have due regard to rural needs when
 - Developing, adopting, revising, implementing strategies and plans
 - Designing and delivering public services
- Report how rural needs addressed annually

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

- Review list of public bodies subject to the act
- May if appropriate
 - Provide guidance, advice and information about rural needs
 - Undertake, commission or support research relating to rural needs
- Publish annual report, lay before assembly, Minister to give a speech
- Facilitate cooperation

Conspicuous omissions

- Rural needs not clearly defined: “social and economic needs of persons in rural areas”
 - What counts as rural?
 - How to distinguish between a need and a want?
- Monitoring and reporting, but no governance structure
 - Who decides that “due regard” has been met?
 - What happens in cases of non-compliance?



Some observations and comments

- Rural proofing in Northern Ireland and England subject to stinging critiques in terms of implementation and policy achievements
- As a policy instrument found to be deficient
- Implementation patchy
- Responsibility shirked
- Objectives unclear
- Poor evidence base and no clear policy objectives



Observations
and
comments

Rural proofing creates an urban-rural binary that is not the reality in Northern Ireland

Rural proofing/ Rural Needs Act perpetuates an idea of needy rural areas or deprived/ disadvantaged rural areas

It does not distinguish within or between rural areas

Observations
and
comments:

Lack of confidence in the Rural Needs Act

Seen as a pretence rather than seriously
addressing rural issues

Obfuscates fiscal discussions about what
services it is reasonable to expect in rural areas

Obscures differences between desirable and
essential services

Conclusions: going forward

Rural policy
difficult because
it is across DGs:
Will the Rural
Observatory be
the watchdog?

Good Data is
critical to good
policy. Connect
to the Rural
Action Plans?

Need priorities:
if it is
everything, it is
nothing

Identify different
strategies for
different actors
involved in rural
proofing