7 November 2008

Roy Griffin
Rural Policy Branch
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Room 407
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast BT4 3SB
ruralpolicy.branch@dardni.gov.uk

Dear Mr Griffin

Response to a Consultation Paper on the concept of Rural Champion role and enhancement of the rural proofing process

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (‘the Commission’) is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on age, fair employment and treatment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation and disability. The Commission’s remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the positive disability duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department’s consultation on the concept of a Rural Champion role and enhancement of the rural proofing process.
Legislative protection

The last 35 years have seen the development of equality legislation in Northern Ireland. Grounds for protection against discrimination now include religion, political opinion, gender, disability, sexual orientation and age. The protection in most instances extends beyond employment to include training, the provision of goods, facilities and services and allows for positive action to effectively address inequalities.

Further, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires designated public authorities, in their policy-making and service delivery, to have regard to the promoting of equality of opportunity and good relations. Key aspects of these processes include consulting and involving people in the decisions which affect their lives.

While none of this legislation includes specific reference to rural differences, rural areas have not been left unchanged by commitments to equality of opportunity. The anti-discrimination legislation applies as equally in rural as in urban areas. The positive duties contained in the legislation offer the same mechanisms to test and develop policy to achieve equality outcomes.

Role of equality and good relations in rural champion’s role and their leadership to bring this about

The rural landscape in Northern Ireland has changed significantly in recent years. It has required imaginative diversification to sustain farming and to ensure that rural communities remain vibrant communities, which add value to the fabric of our society as they always have. In recognition of the contribution that rural communities and businesses have made, an important policy initiative that the new Northern Ireland Executive implemented (under Minister Brid Rogers) was the need for all public policy to be rural proofed. This requirement is largely complementary to the statutory requirements under Section 75. Concepts of equality and good relations are therefore key to a sense of wellbeing in local rural communities.

With this policy context in mind, we recommend that equality of opportunity and good relations are central to a Rural Champion’s role and are at the heart of the institutions which benefit from the leadership that a Rural Champion role provides. The Commission believes that leadership in this area is a key dimension to equality considerations in public life and in public
bodies, as we know that the Rural Champion role will be perceived by many as a role model on public policy issues affecting the rural community. In practice, this means that leadership, communication and accountability are underlying principles, and will need to operate within a collaborative style that is inclusive for all. With this in mind, it is of course important to balance the interests of the majority, while at the same time protecting the interests of minority groups.

Nature of equality and good relations principles

Equality of opportunity and good relations are both positive and dynamic concepts. They go beyond the mere avoidance of discriminatory practice and require positive steps to be taken to express and embrace these principles in their richest interpretation. The respect for difference and the absence of discrimination do not capture the full potential of equality of opportunity. The responsibility to promote equality of opportunity and good relations is therefore an active one. We therefore recommend that the Rural Champion role squarely addresses the issue of equality of opportunity and good relations, and should consider the application of equality scheme requirements in this context, as an aid to policy appraisal. Through robust assessment, the complex needs of both the rural and urban people who make up our society can best be considered and appropriate responses made ensuring the public good, the protection of all minorities and, ultimately, delivery of equality of opportunity and good relations.

Applying equality of opportunity and good relations in a rural context

We know that living in a rural community does not in itself suggest disadvantage or greater inequality, but where public policy is not rural-sensitive (or rather where it is Belfast or urban centric), it can result in disadvantage for many equality groups living in rural communities.

Equality of opportunity is affected by a number of considerations, including: personal economic circumstances, educational opportunity and attainment, social deprivation, loss of talent from a community, and community attitudes as well as unlawful discrimination.

There are a number of key areas where individuals living in rural communities, across the equality grounds, are markedly different to those living in our towns and cities, including:
Women
Discrimination and inequalities are experienced by women in all aspects of life. Women in rural communities who work outside the home are not only faced by such issues as the affordability and quality of childcare but its very existence in some rural communities is a rare commodity. Female farmers still struggle to receive equal recognition, despite the European Union’s long-standing commitment to gender proofing.

Older people
For older people living in rural communities, many suffer from physical isolation, due to their living alone in remote rural dwellings. Rural transport networks and access to public services are therefore key elements to address this remoteseness.

Children and young people
Children and young people in rural areas have not generally been well served by public policies that require a certain critical mass to make the provision of play and recreation facilities economically viable. Using rural school resources brings complications due to structural issues, as schools are the responsibility of the education authority and play provision is the responsibility of the local council. Having a rural focus on public policy would bring a better understanding to this issue of joined-up services.

Disabled people
For disabled people, poor transport infrastructure means that access to suitable community services is even more challenging in the countryside than in our towns and cities, as again the critical mass argument is brought to bear.

Economic costs
Economic costs are used often to limit services and infrastructures in rural communities. Whilst the water charges debate continues throughout Northern Ireland, its impact is more than theoretical to some rural households in Northern Ireland, who are not supplied by mains water because it costs more than the maximum cost per household that the Water Service is prepared to pay.
Move to consideration of a social return on investment

The interdependence between rural and urban communities is such that investment in rural communities brings with it regional well-being. Everyone gains from that investment and therefore the costs are shared by all. Such concepts are well grounded in the pursuit of equality and good relations for all. The Commission believes there is a need to move beyond economies of scale cost arguments on the provision of public services in rural communities to consideration of the social return on investment, measured by rural-sensitive indicators.

An example of this work we would like to highlight is by the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme, where Rural Routes has increased access to services and reduced social isolation for disabled people, older people, unemployed people, lone parents and parents of young children living in rural areas. The Rural Development Council itself, as a public authority, has put equality into its core business through the inclusion of equality objectives in its Corporate Operational Plan, linking to its equality scheme.

I trust you find the comments made in this letter useful. If you would like to discuss any matters arising here in greater detail, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Lisa King

Director - Policy
Direct line: 028 9050 0615
Fax 028 90 315 993 fax
Email lking@equalityni.org