



**Consultation Paper on the concept of a Rural
Champion and enhancement of the rural proofing
process**

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

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Northern Ireland Environment Link is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 51 Full Members represent over 85,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £100 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment.

These comments are agreed by Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments we would be delighted to do so.

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Welcome for the Consultation Paper

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) welcomes the Consultation Paper on the concept of a Rural Champion and enhancement of the rural proofing process and the opportunity to make comments. We believe that the consultation exercise represents an opportunity for Northern Ireland to address many key issues in the area of rural sustainability. We are concerned therefore that the protection of the rural environment has been omitted from the remit of the Rural Champion as outlined in this consultation document and believe that this omission needs to be addressed.

Role 1 Advocate Questions

- a. How can the views of the rural community be articulated best across the Executive?**
- b. Is there a need for formal structures outside government to be put in place to facilitate the advocacy of rural views? If so what should those be?**
- c. If the advocate role sits outside government, what powers should it have and how might they obtain and represent a consensus view from rural communities?**

NIEL believes that the views of the rural community would be articulated best within the Executive by the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. However, we welcome the realisation by policymakers that issues impacting upon rural communities stretch well beyond the remit of DARD, and that rural issues need to be considered in an integrated way across government. The role of a Rural Champion is therefore one for the NI Executive not just DARD alone. The proposed creation of a new Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy, chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, is an important step. This will provide a forum for senior policy officials from all government departments to ensure that rural issues are considered and addressed across government.

We believe that a coordinated approach to rural policy across all areas of Government is necessary to ensure sustainable development of Northern Ireland's rural environment and community. We agree that DARD should represent the concerns of rural people to other branches of government, ensuring that their needs are considered when decisions are made regarding transport, health, etc.

The Northern Ireland Executive has laid out its 'plans and priorities for 2008/2009 and beyond' in the Programme for Government (PfG). The PfG clearly establishes 'Sustainability' as one of its two cross-cutting themes, stating that building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies. The document also lists the protection and enhancement of our environment and natural resources as one of its five priorities. However, the emphasis of the PfG, as seen in the specific proposals, is economic growth. We believe this over-emphasis on economic growth and the lack of enough specific and challenging environmental proposals will be severely detrimental to Northern Ireland's sustainability in the longer term. Given recent changes in the international economic situation and revised estimates of the severity and immediacy of the impacts of climate change it is necessary to review these policies.

Despite the failings of the PfG, the Rural Champion has a responsibility to work towards influencing and achieving sustainability in its recommendations and actions. There is also a duty on all public authorities "to have regard to sustainable

development in all their operations.” The Rural Champion must therefore ensure that in fulfilling its role it provides balanced advice based on maintaining environmental, as well as social and economic sustainability.

NIEL agrees that DARD alone cannot fulfil the role of Rural Champion and that a collective approach is required to champion rural issues both within and outside government. It is also important that government considers rural interests beyond the agri-rural sector. We believe that the Rural Stakeholders Forum should be reinvigorated so that it can provide advice and direction on policy issues affecting both rural communities and the rural landscape. The Sustainable Development Stakeholder Forum should also be revamped and set up to provide advice on rural sustainability issues. As the development and implementation of rural policy has implications for a range of rural interests, DARD should also seek the views of a wide range of organisations and bodies including the Rural Community Network, the Rural Development Council, Agri Rural Forum, Local Action Groups, the NIEA Habitat Delivery Groups (including the Farmland, Freshwater/Wetlands, Peatlands/Uplands and Native Woodland Delivery Groups), NIPAN, local area partnerships such as the Mourne Heritage Trust, environmental NGOs and the All Party Assembly Group on Rural Sustainability, in order to ascertain rural needs. By utilising these fora, DARD, as a Rural Champion, can ensure it receives representative viewpoints from agricultural, wider rural and environmental interests. This will inform decision making and help deliver more co-ordinated and consistent rural policies.

Following the implementation of the RPA, the 11 new local authorities will have increased responsibilities and will also have more of a role to act as Rural Champions and to interact with DARD and its Minister to influence policy. Responsibilities for community planning, rural development and the coordination of Local Action Groups are particularly important for rural communities and there is a need to ensure that in delivering these responsibilities councils consider rural sustainability and use their powers to increase the sustainability of rural communities.

Role 2 Watchdog / Mainstreamer Questions

- a. What support mechanisms do you think are necessary for effective rural proofing?**
- b. What elements of the enhanced rural proofing process might be delivered inside or outside government?**
- c. Aside from rural proofing, are there other actions that should be undertaken as part of the watchdog / mainstreamer role, and who might undertake them?**

It is our view that the new Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy should take responsibility for reinvigorating the rural proofing process. If rural proofing is to be successfully mainstreamed into all areas of government, this Committee is best placed to drive this role. NIEL supports the view that enhanced rural proofing should be based around the four key actions identified in the document: i.e. Supporting, Analysing/ Implementing, Monitoring and Reporting. However, rural proofing requires a legislative base if it is to receive more than ‘lip-service’ across government and be taken seriously by policymakers in all Departments and Agencies, as well as local authorities.

Proofing should seek to represent the views of all rural stakeholders. There must be a mechanism for external organisations to provide input into the work of the Interdepartmental Committee. We note that within the terms of the ‘supporting role’ that comprehensive guidance, advice, promotion and training will be provided for policymakers. NIEL suggests that a key part of this training should focus on

sustainable development, environment protection and the need for and relevance of habitat protection and enhancement.

NIEL also believes that DARD should provide technical support for rural-proofing for other government departments and local authorities. The necessary resources must be made available to ensure all stakeholders are able to fulfil their role.

Role 3 Listener Questions

- a. What type of mechanism should be established and what should be its responsibilities?**
- b. Who should be represented on any listener mechanism and how often should it meet?**
- c. Can individual needs and obtaining a collective rural voice be balanced through this type of mechanism or are there other avenues for developing the listener role?**

We believe that the Interdepartmental Committee should seek the views of a wide range of organisations and bodies including the Rural Stakeholders Forum, the Sustainable Development Stakeholder Forum, the Rural Community Network, the Rural Development Council, Agri Rural Forum, Local Actions Groups, the NIEA Habitat Delivery Groups (including the Farmland, Freshwater/Wetlands, Peatlands/Uplands and Native Woodland Delivery Groups), NIPAN, local area partnerships such as the Mourne Heritage Trust, environmental NGOs and the All Party Assembly Group on Rural Sustainability, in order to ascertain rural needs. Each of the proposed 11 new Local Authorities also needs to be consulted given their new community planning and rural development remit and their existing responsibilities for the design and implementation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

A mechanism needs to be introduced which can facilitate true engagement between government (through the Interdepartmental Committee) and these stakeholders. Given the extra work required by NGOs to effectively fulfil their role in contributing to the Rural Champion and rural proofing process, resources in the form of information, advice, training and financial support should be made available so that they can fulfil these important roles. This will help connect rural communities with policymakers.

NIEL welcomes the suggestion that part of DARD's 'listener' role will entail providing feedback to stakeholders on how their voice has been listened to. The Department must also demonstrate where representations made have been taken into account.

Role 4 Advisor Questions:

- a. How can evidence be best gathered on rural issues?**
- b. What is the best way to make this information available?**
- c. Should this information be managed and presented internally or externally to government? Why?**

There already exists a wealth of information on agricultural, rural and environmental issues which impact upon Northern Ireland's rural communities. We believe that this information and future information can provide valuable evidence to assist in the formulation of rural policy. Therefore, we welcome the decision by DARD to commission work on how best this data can be gathered, maintained and made available.

The document highlights English, Welsh and Scottish approaches to sharing information. These include examples of an external research organisation, a web based depository and a discussion forum. We suggest that a model which incorporates all three of these approaches is implemented. We recommend that an external and independent research organisation is created (or an existing organisation is provided with enhanced role and funding) which can compile and maintain a web based depository and receive feedback from individuals and the range of stakeholders highlighted above. Crucially, the information held should be made available to all interested parties as well as government officials. This will ensure transparency and also increase the ability of stakeholders to recommend evidence based policies.

Role 5 Initiator Questions

- a. How do we ensure maximum benefit from rural initiatives?**
- b. What do you think are the most important issues and challenges that rural areas face now, and will face in 10 years time?**

NIEL support the view that a rural champion should have a key role in initiating and delivering strategies and programmes as well as promoting pilot projects and innovative actions. If successful, these actions should be mainstreamed across wider areas. We also endorse the view that, through its initiator role, a Rural Champion should co-ordinate and facilitate joint meetings of those with an interest in or responsibility for issues that affects rural communities. Such a role should ensure that rural issues do not suffer from a lack of ownership and responsibility across government.

Maximum benefit can be derived from rural initiatives by ensuring that all government departments and external stakeholders are fully involved in the assessment of need and the design and implementation of initiatives. The achievement of the maximum benefit will also be dependent upon effective and on-going monitoring and evaluation of initiatives. It is important that experiences are shared across government and with all rural stakeholders. The utilisation of local, national and international best practice can also help contribute to achieving maximum benefit of rural initiatives.

NIEL believes that the most important issues facing rural areas now and for the foreseeable future are sustainable development, environmental protection, changes in land use, adaptations to climate change and habitat enhancement. The rural landscape will continue to be affected by the growing demand for development and associated infrastructural requirements such as roads, street lighting, amenity provision, etc. in rural areas. Potential conflicts between the interests of farmers, members of the rural community and environmental protection are likely to increase in rural areas as development continues to occur in an unsustainable way. Take, for example, the opposing positions adopted in relation to rural planning in general and PPS14 in particular. Similarly, environmental protection and agricultural practices will need to be better reconciled if Northern Ireland is to achieve the targets established by its various Species and Habitats Actions Plans. The challenge for a Rural Champion will be to reconcile the conflicting demands placed upon our countryside and to do so in a way that ensures all interests feel that they can be heard and their concerns are being dealt with impartially.

Role 6 Exemplar Questions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. How do we identify best practice in rural communities and government?b. How can we promote rural best practice? |
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NIEL recommends that an external and independent research organisation is created, or an existing organisation is expanded, which can compile and maintain a web based depository. Its role should be extended to require the evaluation of all rural policies and projects initiated and implemented by government and rural stakeholders. Such an approach should ensure the identification of best practice which can then be disseminated.

Final Questions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. What do think the rural champion concept should do?b. Have we identified all of the roles of Rural Champion? If not, what have we missedc. Do you think there is merit in the collective approach which identifies roles and responsibilities across local and national government and support structures?d. Would you suggest an alternative approach? If so please explain what that should be.e. What role(s) do you see being performed outside government? |
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NIEL is content with the overall concept of a Rural Champion as outlined in the consultation paper. We do, however, have real concerns that this Rural Champion will fail to represent all rural interests in an equitable way. While agriculture remains an important driver in rural society, the interests of rural communities and environmental sustainability must also be safeguarded. The protection of the rural environment is a notable omission from the remit of the Rural Champion as outlined in the consultation document and this situation must be addressed. The role of a Rural Champion must therefore be to develop a partnership approach involving all the key stakeholders if we are to achieve a sustainable and vibrant rural community. Similarly, the drive for, and rather narrow focus on, economic development as outlined in the PfG cannot be allowed to supersede the need for sustainable development in rural areas. We believe that any Rural Champion must listen to the independent voices from outside of government and have a focus on longer-term sustainability issues.

We thank you for the opportunity to make these comments. We hope that you find them helpful and that they will be taken into account in your decision. If you would like to discuss them further please do contact us.