

Fact Sheet: Rural Proofing

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The general principle:

- Rural proofing is a commitment by government to review and examine all public policy to ensure it does not disadvantage rural areas. In Northern Ireland the principle is defined as follows: ‘Rural proofing is to ensure that the needs and special considerations of rural communities and areas are routinely and objectively considered as part of the policy development process.’ⁱ
- DEFRA define rural proofing as ‘a commitment by the Government to ensure that all its domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs.’ⁱⁱ In England, rural proofing is mandatory.
- The process of rural proofing is very clearly defined. Rural proofing check-lists exist for Government Departments to review existing and new policies in terms of their impact on rural areas. Rural proofing is *not* about designing new policies, but rather a tool to assist Departments assess their policies. Annual reports assess the progress made with rural proofing.
- Responsibility for rural proofing may rest with a Government Department (DARD) or with an independent external body (Commission for Rural Communities).
- Rural proofing requires a ‘champion’ or Government Department

The philosophy of rural proofing

- While rural proofing is described in detail as a *process*, less clear is the desired *outcomes*. What do we want rural proofing to do? But the first part of that question is why do we rural proof?
- Why do we rural proof? Why does government engage with this activity or why should it? One reason is social equity or a belief that people are entitled to specific aspects of life. The driving force is a belief that there is an inherent right that must be met by societyⁱⁱⁱ. Typically this includes the belief that rural residents should not be beyond a certain distance to services, should not bear a cost for

rural dwelling, and have easy access to services. While it is never stated, it is assumed that the comparator is urban areas. In this respect rural proofing is similar in origin to the CAP, whose underlying objective was to ensure a comparable standard of living for farmers with industrial workers^{iv}.

Opening up the philosophy of rural proofing

- Public policy ensures^v the protection of individual human rights and social values. It also aims to ensure equality of opportunity. For example, Section 75 placed a statutory obligation on public authorities in carrying out their various functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity. It is not clear how rural proofing interacts with Section 75.
 - Is there a need to promote spatial equality of opportunity?
 - Is rural a category of disadvantage?
 - Should rural proofing be confined to Section 75 categories?
 - It is not spatial location that is the causal explanation for deprivation but other factors (education, social class, income, disability).
- The previous questions bring us back to the need to clearly define the underlying reason WHY we rural proof.
 - What do we want to achieve?
 - Is rural proofing trying to achieve equality of opportunity or equality of outcome?
 - For whom?
 - Is rural proofing for all rural dwellers indiscriminately, or for deprived rural dwellers?
 - Is there a societal commitment to keeping people in rural areas?
 - To sustainable rural communities?
 - If so it must map out what this looks like and how it will be achieved.
 - This is a task for the Rural White Paper.

- Rural proofing is a tool to review existing and new policies across Government. In this respect it is *reactive* rather than *proactive*. Is there a danger that rural proofing reviews policies that are created without advocating for the hard political decisions that are necessary to ensure rural sustainability; redistribution of markets and heavy investment in infrastructure? Is it even possible to advocate these measures in a global economy?
- Rural proofing seeks to protect rural dwellers. While it is not stated, its comparator is urban. The assumption is that there are negative aspects to rural living which must be ameliorated. Yet, in Northern Ireland, 7% of people say they would live in a big city if they could choose where to live, while 29% say they would live on a farm or in a home in the country. Happiest with where they live are people who live on a farm or in a home in the country. 89% of people think the countryside provides a healthier environment in which to live, 70% think there is a more community spirit in rural areas, and 75% think the countryside is a better place to bring up children^{vi}. Is rural proofing able to factor in the positive elements of rural living?

Obstacles and barriers to rural proofing

The following obstacles and barriers to rural proofing are collated from reviews of rural proofing^{vii}

- There is a lack of familiarity across government with the rural proofing checklist.
- Departments find it difficult to use because the rural proofing checklist is general, and it is not tailored to specific policy issues within any department.
- The checklist does not link with the policy cycle; policy makers are made aware of it ‘after the event’ rather than during the process when it could be embedded in policy. This leads to post hoc justification of no rural impact.
- There is a ‘spatial blindness’ across government. People find it very difficult to assess different spatial impacts.
- The meaning of rural proofing is ill-defined. It is not clear what the objective is.
- The lack of adequate baseline information is used as justification for inaction.

- While rural proofing is mandatory in England, it remains the case that many departments ignore it. Legislating for rural proofing will not ensure it is undertaken.
- Rural proofing fails to recognise the differences between rural areas.
- Rural proofing leads to some annoyance about special pleading for rural areas when many rural residents are well-off and live in rural areas by choice.
- The House of Commons Report commented that Defra's policy of rural proofing is neither rigorous nor systematic. They also noted that Defra seemed to give less attention to rural affairs because it argued that nurturing rural areas required rural proofing by other departments rather than Defra action. The Report recommended that Defra take a more proactive approach with other departments rather than a reactive one.

Moving forward

- The appointment of a dedicated rural statistician analysing and making available the NISRA rural / urban statistics would positively resolve a number of the obstacles and barriers identified above:
 - It provides comprehensive data and baseline information
 - It would allow the tailoring of information specific to departmental needs
 - DARD would be seen to take a *proactive* role in pushing rural proofing forward across government
 - It would provide data for stakeholders as well as for government
- Revisit previous DARD policy on implementing rural proofing. The previous Rural Proofing Unit was applauded for the quality of training it provided for other departments. Some kind of training on rural proofing should be provided by DARD.
- A key aspect for the success of rural proofing will be a body to oversee, monitor and review its process. While there is merit in the idea of establishing an independent body to undertake this task, there is also merit in keeping it as a DARD responsibility. If there is a dedicated statistician in house, then this is

likely to allow DARD to be more effective in promoting rural proofing across government and amongst stakeholders. Evidence suggests reasoned advice is more effective than lobbying^{viii}.

- Rural proofing needs to be clearly defined. The checklist needs to be revisited, and specific checklists designed for specific departments.
- The House of Commons Report chastises Defra for focusing on rural communities and not on rural disadvantage. There is scope for DARD to more specifically focus on rural disadvantage in revised rural proofing checklists. The statistician can help to provide an evidence base on issues of disadvantage in rural areas.
- The rationale for rural proofing is crucial. There is a perfect opportunity to spell out why we need spatial proofing in the White Paper. At the moment, arguments are ideological rather than economic, and there is a sense that rural areas are more of a drain on the NI economy than a contributor. The rural statistician, if appointed, should spell out the economic importance of the rural economy. Rural areas play a key role in the provision of public goods. People in Northern Ireland are committed to having a vibrant, living countryside and believe urban and rural dwellers should bear the cost for the maintenance of the countryside as a public good^{ix}. The importance of sustainable rural communities as a *contributor* of public goods should be outlined in the Rural White Paper, backed up by existing evidence on what people value about the countryside.

ⁱ DARD 2002. A guide to rural proofing.

ⁱⁱ Rural White Paper, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Freshwater, D. 2007. Rural Development and the Declining Coherence of Rural Policy: An American and Canadian Perspective. Agricultural Economics Research Paper # 467, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.

^{iv} The principle is similar although the detail is different: rural proofing deals with all rural dwellers while in its original design CAP only dealt with farmers, and rural proofing deals with broader issues of social equity, while the CAP primarily focused on income.

^v In its ideal form

^{vi} All figures from Shortall, S. (2006) A 'green and pleasant land'? Public Attitudes to the countryside in Northern Ireland. *Ark Northern Ireland Research Update*. No. 47.

^{vii} Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) Review of rural proofing (2008); CRC Review of Rural Proofing Literature (2008); House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2008) The Potential of England's Rural Economy.

^{viii} CRC Review of Rural Proofing Literature (2008)

^{ix} Shortall, S. (2006) A 'green and pleasant land'? Public Attitudes to the countryside in Northern Ireland. *Ark Northern Ireland Research Update*. No. 47.