Consultation Responses: Nos. 71 - 83

Please note that some respondents submitted identical responses

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Rural Community Network

Title Mr X☐   Ms ☐   Mrs ☐   Miss ☐   Dr ☐   Please tick as appropriate

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Consultation Questions

1) **Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?**

☐   **Yes**

☐x   **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

The aim of the Framework should include reference to "identifying" as well as tackling poverty and social isolation as part of the remit of TRPSI is to better understand the nature of rural poverty and social isolation.

We agree largely with the objectives but two other objectives should be added: 1 That the Framework directs some resources at developing a better understanding of the causes and dynamics of poverty and deprivation in rural NI that will inform the roll out of current and future programmes. This information will be of use across government and is particularly important to inform the rural proofing of policy in other government departments.

2. That mainstreaming of successful projects is seen as an objective of TRPSI rather than as an outcome. In our view there appears to be no reason why a programme like MARA should not be mainstreamed into DSD/Department of Communities or DHSSPS. It has been demonstrated to be successful at targeting vulnerable rural households and has ensured significant access to services for clients.

We accept that mainstreaming TRPSI projects into other Departments' budget is extremely challenging as those budgets continue to reduce but it is essential that DARD and the statutory partners who deliver initiatives invest more time in trying to make mainstreaming happen in this third version of the rural anti poverty programme.

We agree with the intended outcome that there will be a measurable improvement in the quality of life of vulnerable rural dwellers but to demonstrate this outcome the Department must ensure that robust baselines are developed in advance of the roll out of TRPSI initiatives.

2) Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?

☐   **Yes**

☐X   **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

Agree that these are key priority areas but several questions arise:

1. How will DARD define social isolation, identify those people in rural communities affected by social isolation and then design programmes that those people will want to engage in?
2. Is there merit in using the travel time to population centres data contained in the NISRA Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements as a way of targeting the social isolation interventions?
3. How will DARD and other partners ensure initiatives are targeted on socially isolated people in rural communities rather than at the general population in an area?
4. Will additional resource be provided to initiatives that are targeting people who are suffering both financial poverty and social isolation as they are coping with a broader range of disadvantage?

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

☐ **Yes**

☐X **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The first key principle states that TRPSI will focus on addressing the needs of rural communities. In our view this is too broad a principle and should be re-worded to state that "the framework will focus on the needs of people who are affected by financial/access poverty or social isolation in rural communities". We acknowledge the challenge of targeting individuals and households suffering for poverty and social isolation in rural communities. In many rural communities there may still remain a stigma around acknowledging of problems and asking for help. Even in urban communities most people do not self identify as being "in poverty". However unless the Framework overcomes this issue of targeting it is open to the accusation that it is merely a suite of initiatives delivered in rural communities generally and will not achieve it's aims.

We particularly welcome principles 3 & 4 encouraging partnership working and acknowledging the important role played by the rural community sector - but would stress the need to resource and support this sector for the duration of the programme especially as budgets are constrained.

Key principle 5 on mainstreaming should not be required if mainstreaming is identified as a key framework objective.

Key principle 9 should include reference to the need for consideration by NISRA of more accurate rural deprivation measurements - and the need for identification of children in poverty in rural areas.

RCN suggests that a further principle be included supporting the need for initiatives to focus on early intervention programmes with children as significant evidence now exists to support the efficacy of early intervention in relation to health, and anti-poverty programmes.

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

☐   Yes

☐X   No

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

> RCN is of the view that the Framework should identify fewer target groups but put more focus on initiatives that target individuals and households that are suffering from financial/access poverty and/or social isolation.
>
> Targeting should be based on evidence of need and evidence that no other programme is currently available that would support an intervention – so as to reduce duplication of effort.

5)   (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

> It is difficult to offer an assessment of the effectiveness of the measures in the draft Action Plan as they only indicate the types of initiatives that may be funded in the next programme. We are, however, largely supportive of the indicative examples outlined.
>
> We believe that to improve urban rural linkages the Frameworks should also refer to the need to tackle mobile phone "not-spots". This is a crucial blockage in developing urban rural linkages and although we are aware of the Mobile Infrastructure Project funded by the Westminster government we are also aware that it is significantly behind schedule. Any contribution by TRPSI

may be worth considering in those communities not served by any mobile provider.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address *Access Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

TRPSI should consider developing a transport scheme for younger people in rural areas to aid access to employment, education & training and services. Young people with disabilities should also be facilitated by a travel scheme to ensure they can take advantage of "day opportunities" as they arise.

Access to advice services needs to be considered for more remote rural areas – how can vulnerable people get equality of access to advice services given the current withdrawal of much outreach support and the challenges facing the Advice sector.

Warm homes – there is a specific gap/disadvantage for older solid wall homes which are harder to treat and which are more likely to occur in rural communities –TRPSI could consider an additional measure/initiative to "top-up" the affordable warmth scheme to target those homes most affected by fuel poverty in rural areas.

TRPSI could also consider working with the NI Housing Executive to tackle the issue of unfitness in private sector dwellings in rural communities. Housing unfitness levels in rural areas has increased since the Housing Executive was forced to withdraw maintenance grants.

TRPSI could develop a scheme to provide vulnerable rural dwellers with the means to access broadband in their homes as well as investing in broadband connectivity into communities. A small number of pilot schemes could be funded and evaluated to measure the difference access to broadband as well as devices to access the internet make to poorer/socially isolated households – e.g. cheaper bills, availability of online discounts, easier access to government/statutory services.

TRPSI could consider an additional top up to rural afterschool projects as we know from anecdotal evidence that some rural afterschool schemes face additional costs in relation to transporting children from school to off-site afterschool provision.

RCN believes that the Assisted Rural Travel Scheme should be retained under the new TRPSI framework because it has had a significant impact on social isolation.

Consider the development of a rural poverty research project to better identify trends in rural poverty across different demographic groups. This work could then inform future DARD programmes on poverty and deprivation as well as informing programmes developed by other government departments.

We support the need for intervention on essential skills. TRPSI could consider the development of a numeracy and literacy project in rural schools based on the OFMDFM Signature Project on numeracy and literacy which delivered successful outcomes for disadvantaged children very quickly.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

It is difficult to offer an assessment of the effectiveness of the measures in the draft Action Plan as they only indicate the types of initiatives that may be funded in the next programme. We are largely supportive of the indicative examples outlined.

Financial poverty – affordable warm homes – reducing unfitness and ensuring energy efficiency. TRPSI could pilot a community energy scheme where local people benefit from locally produced energy and sell the rest back to the grid – there is a successful pilot project operating in Cloughjordan Co. Tipperary.

We would suggest that an initiative be taken in this round of TRPSI which focuses on children and child poverty as there was no specific initiative focused on children in the last programme.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

There may be scope for TRPSI to facilitate access to advice services, or even an online self help resource to ensure that those working on an intermittent basis or who are self employed and whose income fluctuates significantly maximise any benefit entitlements. Whilst MARA has succeeded in reaching older people the average age of clients was 64 years and over 80% lived in households that did not contain children under 18 years. There may be merit in targeting working families to try to maximise access for those families in low paid or intermittent work.

If a further version of the MARA project is run which is indicated by the reference in the Action Plan "Support access to and awareness of benefits

and entitlements" RCN is strongly of the view that referrals for benefit entitlement checks must be made to independent advice agencies. The need for independent advice services is crucial. As claimants go through the changes introduced by Welfare Reform we believe that referral to independent advice agencies will lead to a higher rate of return to claimants, compared to claimants referred to SSA for benefit entitlement checks.

Management of household debt maybe one further area where TRPSI could develop a specific intervention which could have a significant impact on reducing household expenditure for those households affected.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Again it is difficult to offer an assessment of the effectiveness of the measures in the draft Action Plan as they only indicate the types of initiatives that may be funded in the next programme. We are, however, largely supportive of the indicative areas for intervention outlined.

There is a risk that the measures contained in the social isolation priority area are too broad to effectively impact on those people in rural communities who are socially isolated. There is also a risk that interventions may duplicate work carried out by Peace, INTERREG and Big Lottery.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

TRPSI should consider developing an initiative aimed at older men who are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and who often do not engage with older peoples' groups that are mostly attended by older women.
GAA or Loyal Orders/churches may be partners that could be approached to develop this type of project.

We know the value of rural luncheon clubs to older people and these have been facilitated by the ARTS scheme which is a further reason why ARTS should be retained.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

Please provide comments in the box below

Ensure that the rural community support structure is spread right across rural NI so that groups can avail of community development support right across NI.

Ensure that the rural community support structures are highlighting issues of financial/access poverty and social isolation within their network members and identifying projects/initiatives from which good practice can be disseminated

9) How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?

Please provide comments in the box below

TRPSI can support the delivery of new community plans by sharing learning with councils about which initiatives are delivering most impact on tackling poverty and social isolation.

TRPSI may also offer insights into particular communities and groups experiences of poverty, social isolation or lack of services that community plans may also need to address.

10) Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:

(i) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

(ii) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

Implementation Monitoring & Evaluation

We believe that DARD and partners should establish outputs/outcomes desired at the start of the initiatives and monitor and evaluate accordingly to demonstrate clear impact.

RCN recommends that an advisory group of interested stakeholders - or one made up of community and voluntary sector representatives be used to support the monitoring of the TRPSI programme similar to the NIRDP monitoring group. In our view this would bring added value to the programme and keep the programme connected across sectors.

Child Poverty

We recommend that DARD undertakes further research on child poverty in rural areas using intelligence from rural schools and teachers. This research should also aim to explore the issue of whether or not children are entitled to Free School Meals but do not take up their entitlement and if so the reasons why.

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

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1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Aughlish Ulster Scots Group

Title Mr x   Ms ☐   Mrs ☐   Miss ☐   Dr ☐   Please tick as appropriate

Surname

Patton

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2. Postal Address

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Postcode BT63 6JZ	**Phone** 07988332250	**Email** aughlish@gmail.com

1) Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?

X Yes

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

It is our view that the aims and objectives of the framework have identified the key issues impacting upon the rural community. However for the actions which must flow from this to be most effective it is essential that community network organisations which retain the confidence of the community are involved in the delivery. As an organisation we have "first hand" experience of the work carried out by County Armagh Community Development in delivery of the TRIPSI programme to the PUL community and recognise the value of such an organisation

2) Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?

X Yes

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

It is our opinion that these areas remain as priority issues for the rural community.

Social isolation remains a major issue in rural areas and community organisations like ourselves have an important role to play in providing opportunities to tackle social isolation. In appreciating the impact of rural poverty it is essential to appreciate the difficulties facing the working poor and included in this are people who may be deemed to be asset rich but who have limited disposable income.

Access poverty is a very real issue for the people of this area as there are no basic services in the village of Scarva and public transport is insufficient outside key school hours

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

x   Yes

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

X   Yes

No

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The list is obviously not intended to be restrictive but does cover many of the appropriate groups. We believe that the specific targeting of the PUL community in the previous programme needs to be continued . Evaluation has shown that much good work has been done in this area but that much more needs to be done. Failure to continue this work could endanger the future of many existing community groups and organisations in the PUL community and preclude further development in this marginalised section of society.

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Access Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

The measures contained in the draft Action Plan could be extremely effective in addressing Acess poverty but it will also require partnership working with a range of statutory authorities and utilising the contacts knowledge of community organisations to assist in this.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address *Access Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

In our village access poverty is a major issue as people have to travel to access services as none are available in the village. There needs to be some incentive for the likes of Translink to improve bus and train links at appropriate times. It should also be possible to explore alternative transport usage such as school buses.

6) **(a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas**

The measures contained in the draft Action Plan could be extremely effective in addressing Financial Poverty but as always it will be maximised if rural people are comfortable with those helping to deliver initiatives and have confidence/trust in those engaging them

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas
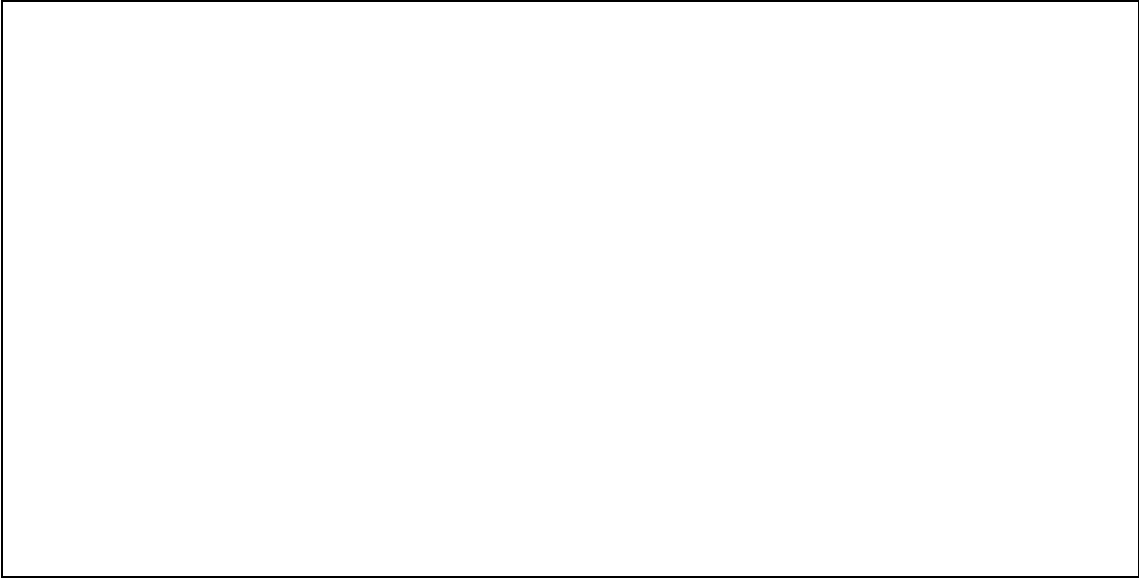
7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The measures contained in the draft Action Plan could be extremely effective in addressing Social Isolation but as always it will be maximised if rural people are comfortable with those helping to deliver initiatives and have confidence/trust in those engaging them. It is imperative that responsibility for delivery is not vested in statutory authorities or organisations that are remote from people and are unable to make the necessary connections.
It will be essential that there is partnership with local networks, faith based and community organisations.
Local community groups and organisations have a major role to play in "on the ground" delivery

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

8) **How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?**

Please provide comments in the box below

It would be important that the specific programme of support to the PUL community is continued Those of us working in those communities appreciate the work that has been done to date but recognise that much more needs to be done. It is essential to recognise the reality behind targets in the current programme being met and the amount of work that remains to be done

9) **How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?**

Please provide comments in the box below

It is extremely important that there is joined up thinking in delivery to meet the needs of the rural community.

10) Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:

(iii) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

(iv) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

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1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Magheralin Community Association

Title Mr ☐ **Ms** ☐ **Mrs**√ ☐ **Miss** ☐ **Dr** ☐   **Please tick as appropriate**

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Consultation Questions

1) Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?

☐ **Yes√**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

We as a Community Organisation work with our RSN and support the work that they do. I have read the response to be submitted by the Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) and would agree with their response to all of the questions

The LRSNs have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures in hundreds of rural villages and communities to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. Although not clearly highlighted in some of the TRPSI consultation papers, it has been acknowledged by all stakeholders (from The Minister and the ARD Committee to local groups) that all the other TRPSI measures in the current programme were dependent on a solid and responsive rural community infrastructure across NI. The LRSNs have worked closely with DARD for over 20 years to put that infrastructure in place and that is the reason so many of the TRPSI measures have been so successful.

For example, in recent months the Rural Capital Micro Grant Programme has been promoted for DARD by the LRSNs and 2 phases have been rolled out to small rural groups in every part of rural NI. The programme has been oversubscribed and highly effective in targeting small grants at the most needy groups, helping them to deliver a wide range of local rural services. The MARA programme, Farm Families Health Checks and the promotion of Library services have all exceeded their targets thanks in large part to the promotional and organisational abilities and reach of the LRSNs. A local presence and knowledge of the area is to key to successful delivery.

This experience linked to the hundreds of rural groups and thousands of individuals associated with the LRSNs means that the Networks can help DARD to meet the objectives set in section 6 "Proposals for a successor Framework post 2016". Together with other rural stakeholders, we can "promote the development of new and innovative pilot approaches to TRPSI AND encourage effective partnership working AND effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas".

2) **Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?**

☒   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks believe that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework as they are still relevant in 2016, encapsulate the varying needs of the rural community and encompass a service deliverability which can be most effectively demonstrated through a local or sub regional level approach.

The identification and successful delivery of various projects and programmes within these priorities would continue to bring greatest positive impact to the needs of those experiencing rural poverty and isolation. The priorities allow for a bottom-up community development approach in not only identifying relevant needs but also in delivering upon them using a cascade approach. It is our view that the most effective TRPSI programmes delivered to date have had a strong community ethos and process coupled with local knowledge access to where rural, social and economic needs are most prevalent. Invariably, there will be different levels of need in different geographical areas, however, as the nature of community sector delivery is designed sub regionally and is based on pertinent local needs then those most in poverty or experiencing isolation have less probability in remaining outside the reach of these priorities and programmes.

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework and it's priorities to date has been an excellent package of funding aimed at supporting vulnerable people and targeting the root causes of social isolation. As programmes take effect and outputs deliver meaningful change there are indeed necessary modifications within the themes or priorities which are required to continue to make most impact on the frameworks aims whilst external factors such as austerity and public budget finance availability will also determine and prioritize future considerations.

It is our view that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework since programmes can emerge from these themes which meet best the local community needs.

TRPSI and the priorities has now gained substantial traction and is now recognised as an essential brand which has made a huge difference to rural communities and which is complementary to the NIRDP. Many of the issues these priorities have tackled to date were previously hidden and would fall outside the remit of other mainstream funding programmes. There remains, however, continued challenges, needs and rural TRPSI issues which require on-going support at various levels of intervention and which would still come under these 3 priorities.

The Rural Community Development Support Service currently delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks, as a model of support to TRPSI, is most certainly envied throughout communities in Europe as a model leader in balancing appropriate and measured interventions to social, economic and access poverty issues at a community level. Promoting Community development at a local/sub regional ensures that Regional programmes are delivered effectively at the local level and access to the real needs and issues of communities is provided for. Supporting access to good governance, to economic and social poverty in communities; the service as provided by these local community based networks has proved an invaluable resource to the delivery of the TRPSI framework.

These experienced local stakeholders have good working relationships with all other TRPSI delivery agents and indeed share a direct role in elements of their success making essential and valuable linkages and connections at sub regional and local levels. The key management role of DARD in direct delivery of this programme has

proved to be most effective in ensuring that the networks could assist DARD to manage Regional programmes at local levels and to balance approaches necessary to ensuring programme priority themes reached the community sector using bottom up approaches.

The local access support provided to DARDs Modernisation programme and its Rural Micro Capital Grants programmes, as and when required by DARD, evidence how this infrastructure can react and respond to changing rural needs and requirements. Their modus operandi for the delivery of programmes such as MARA are a testament to the Community Development approach which ensures participation and access to hidden and real needs at a local level across all 3 main priorities.

The networking function plays an invaluable role in achieving key community participation at all necessary levels from village planning facilitation to rural proofing consultation. With the reform of local Government, Community Planning, and the mandatory Charities registration requirements; these networks provide local mentoring support and guidance, technical support and facilitation at grassroots level to those rural communities most in need under the programme priorities of Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation. Most importantly, they can identify what local pertinent needs fit the programme.

We believe that it the approaches taken under the overlying programme priorities which provide the appropriate lynchpins to ensure leverage of many other programmes and projects into rural areas and which have included such as community mental health awareness, capital build infrastructural programmes, rural tourism, lifelong learning, social investment, migrant support etc. These programmes operate in a time of decentralisation and digitization of services, the closing of rural banks, post offices, schools and other services and thus during a time when the greatest need for local people to provide adequate solutions to their own issues and problems within a community development approach. The 3 themes adequately allow for local communities, sub regional and innovative approach making to meeting rural TRPI needs.

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

☒   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The rural support organisations delivering the DARD Rural Support programme agree with the key TRPSI principles as outlined in the framework document. Historically Local Rural Support Networks successfully delivered pilot, innovative projects and interventions collaboratively and in partnership with statutory and other community and voluntary organisations and are widely perceived as the link between grass roots community groups operating at a local level with regional statutory bodies.

Positive outcomes of a collaborative approach to the delivery of services aimed at addressing rural poverty and isolation issues include:
- Ensures the socially isolated and those with financial related issues have access and opportunities to avail of support services
- Increases the capacity of designated rural support organisations and grass roots community groups to collectively and with greater efficiency deliver both services and support interventions that may not be possible if delivered in isolation.

A negative outcome of delivering a successful pilot or innovative project is the lack of funding to effectively mainstream the service or project. Increased opportunities to continue or mainstream projects that have demonstrated effectiveness should be a

key objective of a future TRPSI framework both for addressing poverty and social isolation issues and having to avoid dealing with the expectation when a service or project ceases.

Local Rural Support Networks will continue to be a conduit to disseminate information on key government strategies to the community voluntary sector through their established communication channels and will continue to lobby and be the 'voice' of the rural community sector during discussions with statutory and governmental organisations e.g. Rural Development Programme and Community Planning.

4) **Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?**

☒   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) welcome the proposal that the successor Framework would be open to a wider range of target groups. As an infrastructure providing community development support to the rural community across Northern Ireland for many years, we have, almost without exception, worked with all these vulnerable groups.

We particularly welcome the introduction of the working poor and the under employed. The continuing economic uncertainty has left many families in difficult financial circumstances. One or both parents are working however income levels fall below what they need to have a meaningful quality of life. A sudden change in circumstances, such as marital breakup or ill health, can have further detrimental consequences and lead to social exclusion and poverty.

Mental health still retains a significant stigma, particularly in rural areas, and many of the LRSN's run programmes which directly tackle mental ill health in their communities. Statistics show that one in four run the risk of mental ill health thus their inclusion in this framework is essential.

The inclusion of the LGBT community in the framework is also welcome. Whilst members of the LGBT community live in rural areas they tend to meet and socialise in their nearest town. However LRSN's have a role to play in supporting them to remain in their community and in ensuring statutory organisations and the wider public are aware of the issues affecting them.

Perhaps one omission from the list of vulnerable groups is men. Whilst accepted that most farmers are men there may be male rural dwellers who are not farmers. Globally, the gap between male and female life expectancy and healthy life expectancy has widened in the last 40 years and is expected to get even bigger by 2030. Research commissioned by the Priory Group of 1,000 men found that: 77% of men polled have suffered with anxiety / stress / depression; the biggest pressures in men's life are work (32%), finance (31%) and health (23%); the majority of men claim their mental health is having a negative impact on their work performance, parenting ability and relationships; 40% of men polled said it would take thoughts of suicide or self-harm to compel them to seek professional help.
(www.priorygroup.com/blog/mentalhealth/-i-ve-learnt-to-deal-with-it---40-of-men-won-t-talk-to-anyone-about-their-mentalhealth)

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

We are pleased to welcome the measures in the draft Framework. Many of the proposed measures will go a long way to tackle issues that blight so many rural dwellers. We appreciate that the list of groups is not exhausted. Women, Farmers, People on work on low incomes (the working poor), children and young people, older people and Ethnic Minorities and immigrants, People with low skills or low levels of education et al. Our experience shows that some of the groups need to be broken down into subgroups.

For example there are sections of the farming industry that have seen their incomes severely cut in the last two years (Dairy Farmers). Future prices in this industry predict another 10% drop in the next three months. Mental health in this area gives us great cause for concern. This is evidenced by the increase calls to help lines, up by 30% in the last year.

Many Ethnic Minorities are finding it difficult to assimilate, especially those living in rural communities. There are a number of factors that drive this. Some Ethnic groups neither have English as their first or second language; this communication barrier reinforces isolation and is a contributing factor in poor mental health. Those who have a strong grasp of the English language find it easier to "fit in". This also is a factor in this section being "excepted". In conclusion we think this group of Ethnic minorities should be broken down into sections not exclusively into language sections. I.e. short to medium dwellers who may seasonal workers.
We are pleased with the other target groups and we welcome that people with low skills and low levels of education might have a chance to enhance their employability. The training involved to up skill this group will act as a medium to tackle social isolation. Many who suffer from social isolation either don't recognise their plight or only recognise it when their horizons broaden due to intervention from an un-proscribed source. I.e. further education either social education or accredited.

The "Outcomes based pilot programmes" is also most welcome. This allows delivery agents latitude to make informed researched based decisions that will go to the heart of rural poverty and social isolation.

Under 6.8 V we strongly concur with the mainstreaming of successful pilot projects. The Department launch the Rural Community Micro Grants 2015-2016. We in the Rural Support Networks found this reached parts of the rural community that had gone under the radar in the past. This has opened a pathway for community development that goes to the core of TRPSI policy. This merges into 6VII "sustainability". Some groups for the first time now see a pathway using a community development approach with the support of the Networks. 6.8 X The sharing of information and best practice learning between organisations has the potential that prevents groups trying to "reinventing the wheel" and will avoid duplication between organisations.

6.8 XI The community planning and the consultation process will be key, both in a strategic and a complementary role. It is imperative that at all stages of the community planning the rural voice is heard and well represented. The Networks will play an enabling role to ensure events are well attended and the TRPSI policy principles are promoted.

6.8 VIII Good Relations being promoted. There will be many opportunities to develop innovative partnerships, PEACE IV et al. One should not underestimate the incidental "good relations" through the Rural Development programme. The carrot and stick approach for single identity group has been proven to open halls to a wider diaspora. Not only does this lead to better community relations but adds to the sustainability of the halls.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Rural Community Micro Grants opened many new doors because it gave an incentive for tangible assets to be acquired for the benefit of a particular group. For many this has been the first time in making a funding application. The benefits not only include the asset but their governance has now been under the spotlight and sharpened to enable their participation. We would propose an extenuation of this innovative idea. The structure used to deliver the grants is now well established, this same structure could deliver small capitol grants say up to £10,000 for basic needs that so many halls throughout the country need.

Community transport should be reviewed to widen its scope. Longer journeys should be considered to allow travel between a number of service providers.

Evidence indicates that there is an appetite for computer training in rural areas. The LRSNs could deliver this service. There used to be an outreach service from the Regional Colleges but we don't advocate for its return as the service that they provided no longer is fit for propose. Farmers and rural dwellers want a basic standard of training that may not necessarily be accredited. The end result would be farmers having the ability to make online returns. Farm families coming together will reduce social isolation and lead to a greater understanding of the world wide web.

Greater use and the promotion of Luncheon Clubs in rural areas could provide a service that; tackles social isolation, helps sustain a target audience, increases the sustainability of rural halls. All this combined contributes to the cohesion of rural communities.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

Financial poverty refers to the measure of the degree to which people face the risk of serious deprivation in terms of their standard of living or to when they fall below a specified minimum level of resources. Through the measures in the draft action plan there is the opportunity to raise the standard of living for those people living in rural areas. Particularly in regard to addressing issues such as rural transport which is currently a major issue which prohibits many rural dwellers from accessing essential basic services. In addition measures targeted at supporting household energy efficiency improvement & the introduction of new employability and entrepreneurship opportunities are also to be welcomed.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

Other measures which may alleviate financial poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas include the creation of jobs through investment in infrastructure such as investment in rural hubs, renovating abandoned housing and broadband infrastructure development, therefore increasing the chances of the young people of rural areas to stay, therefore building a stronger rural economy. With added investment in high quality and affordable childcare and early intervention this will create increased opportunities for jobs.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the continued recognition by DARD of the problems caused within the rural population due to Social Isolation. We acknowledge the priority areas for intervention listed within the Draft Action Plan under Social Isolation of promoting tolerance, health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers and through our long established work within rural communities agree that these are valid and worthwhile Priority Areas for Intervention.

Poor Mental Health and well-being is an issue that has major impacts within rural communities given the fact that many people are living in isolated circumstances often on their own or with limited family and / or community connections.
The farming community is also a group who have been shown to have poor mental health as they are facing increasing stresses of managing their businesses, mostly working on an individual basis with limited opportunities to engage with others. Many of the LRSN's have engaged in delivering mental health and wellbeing programmes over the last ten years. All of these programmes have been externally evaluated and have shown excellent results in improving local mental health and wellbeing. Any new pilot programmes delivered under the new framework need to take into consideration the knowledge and learning of the evaluations.

One concern that the LRSN's would have that by naming the priority as _'promote positive mental health and wellbeing'_ rather than '_promoting positive health and wellbeing';_ interventions could be limited in their scope to secure engagement by rural dwellers. There is still a stigma around mental health in rural areas and people would be more likely to engage with activities that are seen to be about general health and wellbeing, people in many instances would not want to be identified through participating in activities as someone who has mental health issue. If people are at least attracted to an activity the issue of mental health can then be addressed.

Therefore as LRSN's we do welcome the example initiatives listed as 'Support for health and wellbeing activities' as well as 'Support the promotion of mental health awareness and actions' and we ask that the learning and evidence from positive work that has been undertaken with rural communities through the LRSN's, Healthy

Living Centres, other Community, Voluntary and Statutory bodies on these actions and activities are used when drawing up plans for initiatives to support under the new TRPSI framework.

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome actions that will support the rural population to improve their health and wellbeing particularly those activities that are operated and provided at local facilities and venues.

The LRSN's welcome that *'increase opportunities for social engagement'* is listed as a priority area of intervention as the value of people of all ages within rural communities being given the opportunity to engage with others on a social basis cannot be underestimated. It is through these social activities that the aim of "promote tolerance, health, wellbeing and inclusion' can be best achieved within rural communities as by bringing people together they are getting to know each other. This is needed within communities as in many instances during their working and education lives many members of rural communities are away from the community during the day and thus have limited opportunities to engage with others. It is only though actual engagement in the same physical space that tolerance can be promoted and this is especially important in rural communities as due to low numbers of people, activities are best organised to attract as many members of the population as possible so that a sufficient number of people attend to make an activity viable. Therefore anything that can be done to encourage use of community facilities that have been traditionally associated as belonging to one section of the community would be welcome. Such venues can become hubs for social inclusion activities within rural communities.

Many venues within rural communities require some level of work to ensure that they are brought up to a condition that they are accessible and suitable to be used to provide activities that address social isolation.

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the inclusion of *'support community capacity'* as an example initiative as a capable and effective local community infrastructure is of vital importance to the fabric of life within rural communities and those involved in organisations within local communities are largely undertaking this role on a voluntary basis. These organisations require ongoing community development support to continue their operations on an effective and efficient basis

and become involved in projects that will address poverty and social isolation at a local level within rural communities.

The community development support work delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks resourced under the previous TRPSI Framework has been very effective in ensuring the survival and continued operation of local community infrastructure. This community infrastructure of the LRSN's working in partnership with organisations located within local communities has also ensured that many of the other initiatives supported under TRPSI have been effective at reaching into rural communities and tackling poverty and social isolation.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Social Isolation* among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome the resourcing of actions to plan and coordinate the effective operation of activities that would address social isolation. This would involve a resource of a person to co-ordinate activities and associated resource budget to cover some of the costs of operating activities particularly training new and innovative activities on a pilot basis. This would ensure that activities are operated on a coordinated and effective basis, securing sufficient numbers, building linkages within and between communities, duplication is avoided and gaps in provision of social inclusion activities are identified and tackled.

The ongoing work within the LRSN's and their delivery of the MARA project has clearly demonstrated that there is a significant issue around mental health problems in homes, particularly depression and loneliness. The framework would provide an excellent opportunity to design a pilot project that would take advantage of the excellent community development model that we have that could be harnessed to deliver a programme to enable rural dwellers to avail of resources to assist them to overcome loneliness and seek help with other mental health conditions. The programme could be designed to ensure a rural community response is adopted to encourage self-help and self-care.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor for rural organisations (e.g. the 9 Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) / Rural Community Development Support Service Contract) in terms ensuring rural proofing, levering-in vital resources to rural areas, and enabling effective implementation of the TRPSI Framework throughout the region.

Making Strategic Facilitation a reality: the TRPSI Framework is vital to ensuring that rural needs are addressed by the government in a localised and joined-up way that reaches the most vulnerable and those most in need.

The successor TRPSI Framework would not only enable much greater utilisation of financial resources, but also would combine the expertise of public sector bodies, and the private, voluntary and community sectors to create greater economies of scale in terms utilising all available knowledge, skills and capacity. This in turn maximises innovation and enables increased access to those most in need and those who are most difficult to reach (e.g. the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households).

TRPSI has been vital in ensuring that *rural* gets its fair share in terms of community development via a high quality networking infrastructure and CD Support Service (9 Rural Support Networks) that are run by grass roots representatives right across the region.

The DARD Rural Micro-Capital Grants Programme (Phases 1 & 2) delivered on-the-ground by the 9 Local Rural Support Networks, have been essential to ensuring capital investment reaches the smallest and lowest capacity rural groups throughout the entire region.

The additional financial leverage from the Local Rural Support Networks alone in terms of additional programmes, projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability, capacity etc)
The LRSNs have been central to the role of assisting the set-up of the new local Action Groups (NIRDP) and ensuring grass roots community representation.

9) How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework could play a key role in the delivery of local Council Community Plans via the TRPSI funded Rural Community Development Support Service which can facilitate the ongoing involvement of the Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) in the community planning process. The foundations for the delivery of Community Planning already exist within the local Council areas through the LRSN's and their vast network of community based organisations – Community Planning should build upon these existing structures. The delivery of Community Planning within the local Council areas will require the engagement of existing and emerging partnerships working collaboratively. The well-established and proven track record of the LRSN's could well be effective resources in such a delivery process. It is imperative that the development of Community Planning includes the continuing engagement of such current resources so as agreed delivery structures for Community Planning are adopted that act as wider collaborative forums for the benefit of the communities that they will ultimately serve.

During the past 4 years the LRSN's have delivered, under the current TRPSI Framework, a Rural Community Development Support Service to a wide range of rural organisation & groups. This has proven to be an effective model and partnership for the delivery of such services and the LRSN's, with continued support from the TRPSI programme, are therefore well placed to assist local Councils in the delivery of community planning over the next number of years due to the following factors:
• Strong partnership & links with the rural community already in place
• Added value from funding leverage from other programmes
• Already working closely with DARD to deliver services including the development of the NI Rural Development Programme (2014-2020)

The delivery structures for the Community Planning process within local Councils must therefore take account of existing rural structures & delivery organisations so as to ensure there is less fragmentation of implementation groups and integration of the various locally focused Action Plans. This will ensure that the Community Planning process will effectively serve the priority needs of the rural community and the ongoing support of DARD for the rural community development sector at grass roots level through the TRPSI framework is crucial to this.

10) Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:

(v) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to contribute, develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. The LRSNs welcome a localised approach to the design and delivery of measures which effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas in line with the key principles of the Framework. The LRSNs are advantageously neutral to central and local government ensuring that all rural communities can access resources, services and programmes in a timely manner regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation or disability. The LRSNs ensure Section 75 information is recorded in line with procedures under International Quality Standard ISO 9001:2008 and kept securely in keeping with Data Protection Legislation.

(vi) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to ensure the TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor ensuring rural proofing and enabling effective implementation positive direct impact on the vulnerable in rural communities through a localised infrastructure. We have effectively engaged in the last 4 years with community organisations including the hardest to reach, socially isolated and most vulnerable of the population in Northern Ireland. Delivering capacity building programmes within rural areas to encourage and ensure participation in the Rural Development Programme. Undertaking the delivery of the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households directly impacting on their quality of life. The LRSNs have also been successful in additional leverage which has had positive indirect impacts. For example we have rolled out projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability) equating to a substantial sum of money. All of these measures support the delivery of key services for rural dwellers and have indirectly helped to tackle social isolation and the related mental health connotations that come with this. The central and neutral role that the LRSNs deliver; give local services for local people and ensure grass roots community representation in rolling out TRPSI Framework.

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Fermanagh Rural Community Network

Title Mr /☐ **Ms** ☐ **Mrs** ☐ **Miss** ☐ **Dr** ☐   **Please tick as appropriate**

Surname

Boyle

Forename

Barry

2. Postal Address

The Intec Centre
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Enniskillen
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Postcode BT74 7BT	**Phone** 028 6632 7006	**Email** info@fermanaghrcn.org

Consultation Questions

1) **Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?**

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network (FRCN) and the other Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures in hundreds of rural villages and communities to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. Although not clearly highlighted in some of the TRPSI consultation papers, it has been acknowledged by all stakeholders (from The Minister and the ARD Committee to local groups) that all the other TRPSI measures in the current programme were dependent on a solid and responsive rural community infrastructure across NI. The LRSNs have worked closely with DARD for over 20 years to put that infrastructure in place and that is the reason so many of the TRPSI measures have been so successful.

For example, in recent months the Rural Capital Micro Grant Programme has been promoted for DARD by the LRSNs and 2 phases have been rolled out to small rural groups in every part of rural NI. The programme has been oversubscribed and highly effective in targeting small grants at the most needy groups, helping them to deliver a wide range of local rural services.

The MARA programme, Farm Families Health Checks and the promotion of Library services have all exceeded their targets thanks in large part to the promotional and organisational abilities and reach of the LRSNs. A local presence and knowledge of the rural area is to key to successful delivery.

This experience linked to the hundreds of rural groups and thousands of individuals associated with the FRCN and the other LRSNs means that the Networks can help DARD to meet the objectives set in section 6 "Proposals for a successor Framework post 2016". Together with other rural stakeholders, we can "promote the development of new and innovative pilot approaches to TRPSI AND encourage effective partnership working and effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas".

2) Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other LRSNs believe that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework as they are still relevant in 2016, encapsulate the varying needs of the rural community and encompass a service deliverability which can be most effectively demonstrated through a local or sub regional level approach.

The identification and successful delivery of various projects and programmes within these priorities would continue to bring greatest positive impact to the needs of those experiencing rural poverty and isolation. The priorities allow for a bottom-up community development approach in not only identifying relevant needs but also in delivering upon them using a cascade approach.

It is our view that the most effective TRPSI programmes delivered to date have had a strong community ethos and process coupled with local knowledge access to where rural, social and economic needs are most prevalent. Invariably, there will be different levels of need in different geographical areas, however, as the nature of community sector delivery is designed sub regionally and is based on pertinent local needs then those most in poverty or experiencing isolation have less probability in remaining outside the reach of these priorities and programmes.

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework and its priorities to date has been an excellent package of funding aimed at supporting vulnerable people and targeting the root causes of social isolation. As programmes take effect and outputs deliver meaningful change there are indeed necessary modifications within the themes or priorities, which are required to continue to make most impact on the frameworks aims whilst external factors such as austerity and public budget finance availability will also determine and prioritise future considerations.

It is our view that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework since programmes can emerge from these themes which meet best the local community needs.

TRPSI and the priorities has now gained substantial traction and is now recognised as an essential brand which has made a huge difference to rural communities and which is complementary to the NIRDP. Many of the issues these priorities have tackled to date were previously hidden and would fall outside the remit of other mainstream funding programmes. There remains, however, continued challenges, needs and rural TRPSI issues which require on-going support at various levels of intervention and which would still come under these 3 priorities.

The Rural Community Development Support Service currently delivered by the Local

Rural Support Networks, as a model of support to TRPSI, is most certainly envied throughout communities in Europe as a model leader in balancing appropriate and measured interventions to social, economic and access poverty issues at a community level. Promoting Community development at a local/sub regional ensures that Regional programmes are delivered effectively at the local level and access to the real needs and issues of communities is provided for. Supporting access to good governance, to economic and social poverty in communities; the service as provided by these local community based networks has proved an invaluable resource to the delivery of the TRPSI framework.

These experienced local stakeholders have good working relationships with all other TRPSI delivery agents and indeed share a direct role in elements of their success making essential and valuable linkages and connections at sub regional and local levels. The key management role of DARD in direct delivery of this programme has proved to be most effective in ensuring that the networks could assist DARD to manage Regional programmes at local levels and to balance approaches necessary to ensuring programme priority themes reached the community sector using bottom up approaches.

The local access support provided to DARDs Modernisation programme and its Rural Micro Capital Grants programmes, as and when required by DARD, evidence how this infrastructure can react and respond to changing rural needs and requirements. Their modus operandi for the delivery of programmes such as MARA are a testament to the Community Development approach which ensures participation and access to hidden and real needs at a local level across all 3 main priorities.

The networking function plays an invaluable role in achieving key community participation at all necessary levels from village planning facilitation to rural proofing consultation. With the reform of local Government, Community Planning, and the mandatory Charities registration requirements; these networks provide local mentoring support and guidance, technical support and facilitation at grassroots level to those rural communities most in need under the programme priorities of Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation. Most importantly, they can identify what local pertinent needs fit the programme.

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks believe that it the approaches taken under the overlying programme priorities provide the appropriate lynchpins to ensure leverage of many other programmes and projects into rural areas which have include community mental health awareness, capital build infrastructural programmes, rural tourism, lifelong learning, social investment, migrant support etc.

These programmes operate in a time of decentralisation and digitization of services, the closing of rural banks, post offices, schools and other services and thus during a time when the greatest need for local people to provide adequate solutions to their own issues and problems within a community development approach.

The 3 themes adequately allow for local communities, sub regional and innovative approach making to address rural poverty and social isolation needs.

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network as one of the rural support organisations delivering the DARD Rural Community Development Support Service programme agree with the key TRPSI principles as outlined in the framework document. Historically FRCN and the other Local Rural Support Networks successfully delivered pilot, innovative projects and interventions collaboratively and in partnership with statutory and other community and voluntary organisations and are widely perceived as the link between grass roots community groups operating at a local level with regional statutory bodies.

Positive outcomes of a collaborative approach to the delivery of services aimed at addressing rural poverty and isolation issues include:
- Ensures the socially isolated and those with financial related issues have access and opportunities to avail of support services
- Increases the capacity of designated rural support organisations and grass roots community groups to collectively and with greater efficiency deliver both services and support interventions that may not be possible if delivered in isolation.

A negative outcome of delivering a successful pilot or innovative project is the lack of funding to effectively mainstream the service or project. Increased opportunities to continue or mainstream projects that have demonstrated effectiveness should be a key objective of a future TRPSI framework both for addressing poverty and social isolation issues and having to avoid dealing with the expectation when a service or project ceases.

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks will continue to be a conduit to disseminate information on key government strategies to the community voluntary sector through their established communication channels and will continue to lobby and be the 'voice' of the rural community sector during discussions with statutory and governmental organisations e.g. Rural Development Programme and Community Planning.

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

☒   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other LRSNs welcome the proposal that the successor Framework would be open to a wider range of target groups. As an infrastructure providing community development support to the rural community across Northern Ireland for many years, we have, almost without exception, worked with all these vulnerable groups.

FRCN particularly welcome the introduction of the working poor and the under employed. The continuing economic uncertainty has left many families in difficult financial circumstances. One or both parents are working however income levels fall below what they need to have a meaningful quality of life. A sudden change in circumstances, such as marital breakup or ill health, can have further detrimental consequences and lead to social exclusion and poverty.

Mental health problems remain a significant stigma, particularly in rural areas, and many LRSN's and other organisations that they support operate programmes, which directly tackle mental ill health in their communities. Statistics show that one in four run the risk of mental ill health thus their inclusion in this framework is essential.

The inclusion of the LGBT community in the framework is also welcome. Whilst members of the LGBT community live in rural areas they tend to meet and socialise in their nearest town. However LRSN's have a role to play in supporting them to remain in their community and in ensuring statutory organisations and the wider public are aware of the issues affecting them.

One group that FRCN and the other LRSNs think should be included on the list of vulnerable groups is 'men'. Whilst accepted that most farmers are men there are many male rural dwellers who are not active farmers. Globally, the gap between male and female life expectancy and healthy life expectancy has widened in the last 40 years and is expected to get even bigger by 2030. Research commissioned by the Priory Group of 1,000 men found that: 77% of men polled have suffered with anxiety / stress / depression; the biggest pressures in men's life are work (32%), finance (31%) and health (23%); the majority of men claim their mental health is having a negative impact on their work performance, parenting ability and relationships; 40% of men polled said it would take thoughts of suicide or self-harm to compel them to seek professional help. (www.priorygroup.com/blog/mentalhealth/-i-ve-learnt-to-deal-with-it---40-of-men-won-t-talk-to-anyone-about-their-mentalhealth)

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other LRSNs welcome the measures in the draft Framework and consider that many of the proposed measures will go a long way to tackle issues that blight so many rural dwellers. FRCN appreciate that the list of groups is not exhausted. Women, Farmers, People on work on low incomes (the working poor), children and young people, older people and Ethnic Minorities and immigrants, People with low skills or low levels of education et al. FRCN experience shows that some of the groups need to be broken down into subgroups.

For example there are many within the farming industry that have experienced severe reductions in their incomes over the last two years. Indications are that prices will drop further in the near future.

Poor Mental health in this area gives us great cause for concern and there is evidence that calls to help lines have increased in the last year.

Many Ethnic Minorities are finding it difficult to assimilate, especially those living in the rural community. There are a number of factors that drive this. Some Ethnic groups neither have English as their first or second language; this communication barrier reinforces isolation and is a contributing factor in poor mental health.
Those who have a strong grasp of the English language find it easier to "fit in". This also is a factor in this section being "accepted". In conclusion we think this group of Ethnic minorities should be broken down into sections not exclusively into language sections, i.e. short to medium dwellers who may be seasonal workers.

FRCN are satisfied with the other target groups and we welcome that people with low skills and low levels of education might have a chance to enhance their employability. The training involved to up skill this group will act as a medium to tackle social isolation. Many who suffer from social isolation either don't recognise their plight or only recognise it when their horizons broaden due to intervention from an un-proscribed source. i.e. further education either social education or accredited.

The "Outcomes based pilot programmes" is also welcomed. This allows delivery agents latitude to make informed researched based decisions that will impact on and reduce rural poverty and social isolation.

Under 6.8 V FRCN strongly concur with the mainstreaming of successful pilot projects. DARD launched the Rural Community Micro Grants 2015-2016. FRCN and the Rural Support Networks found this programme has reached parts of the rural community who had gone under the radar in the past. This has opened a pathway for community development that goes to the core of TRPSI policy. This merges into 6VII "sustainability".
Some groups for the first time now see a pathway using a community development approach with the support of the Networks.

6.8 X The sharing of information and best practice learning between organisations has the potential to prevent groups trying to "reinvent the wheel" and will avoid duplication between organisations.

6.8 XI The community planning and the consultation process will be key, both in a strategic and a complementary role. It is imperative that at all stages of the community planning that the rural voice is heard and well represented. Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Networks have and will continue to undertake an enabling role to ensure events are well attended and the TRPSI policy principles are promoted.

6.8 VIII Good Relations being promoted. There will be many opportunities to develop innovative partnerships, PEACEIV et al. One should not underestimate the incidental "good relations" through the TRPSI and Rural Development programmes. The supportive approach for single identity groups has been proven to open halls to a wider audience. Not only does this lead to better community relations but also adds to the sustainability of the rural halls and venues.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Rural Community Micro Grants opened many new doors because it gave an incentive for tangible assets to be acquired for the benefit of a particular group.
For many this has been the first time in making a funding application. The benefits not only include the asset but their governance has now been under the spotlight and sharpened to enable their participation. FRCN would propose an extenuation of this innovative idea. The structure used to deliver the grants is now well established, this same structure could deliver small capital grants say up to £10,000 for basic needs that so many halls throughout rural communities need.

Community transport should be reviewed to widen its scope. Longer journeys should be considered that travel between the operational areas of service providers.
The current restriction on the providers only working within their operational area is leading to difficulties in persons accessing services such as healthcare appointments at clinics and hospitals outside of their local district or county.

Evidence indicates that there is an appetite for computer and social media training in rural areas. The LRSNs could deliver this service. Farmers and rural dwellers want a basic standard of training that may not necessarily be accredited. A positive result would be Farmers having the ability to make online returns. Farm families and other rural dwellers coming together reducing social isolation and have a greater understanding of the world wide web and how it can be utilised positively.

Many rural families have family members who have emigrated to obtain employment in other regions and countries and thus those remaining at home such as parents and grandparents do not have the levels of family support available now that would have traditionally been a feature of rural communities. Training on use of IT and Social Media would be beneficial for these people to maintain contact with their

family.

Many households within rural County Fermanagh have difficulties in accessing any or at least an adequate Broadband and / or Mobile telephone service. This is impacting on their personal and business lives through not being in position to avail of information and services. The negative impacts of this lack of access to broadband and or mobile coverage is increasing due to removal of local post offices, banks, other services and the increasing use by Government departments including DARD of Online methods to avail of their services and / or advice.
FRCN would ask that DARD use the TRPSI framework to ensure that rural households have some means of accessing the internet within their local community.

Greater use and the promotion of Social Activities such as Luncheon Clubs, Mens Sheds, etc. in rural areas could provide a service that; tackles social isolation, helps sustain a target audience, increases the sustainability of rural halls. All this combined adds to the cohesion of rural communities.

6) **(a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas**

Financial poverty refers to the measure of the degree to which people face the risk of serious deprivation in terms of their standard of living or to which they fall below a specified minimum level of resources.

Through the measures in the draft action plan there is the opportunity to raise the standard of living for those people living in rural areas. Particularly in regard to addressing issues such as rural transport, which is currently, a major issue, which prohibits many rural dwellers from accessing essential basic services.

In addition measures targeted at supporting household energy efficiency improvement & the introduction of new employability and entrepreneurship opportunities are also to be welcomed.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

Other measures which may alleviate financial poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas include the creation of jobs through investment in infrastructure such as investment in rural hubs, renovating abandoned housing and broadband infrastructure development, therefore increasing the chances of the young people of rural areas to stay, therefore building a stronger rural economy.

With added investment in high quality and affordable childcare and early intervention this will create increased opportunities for jobs.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other LRSNs welcome the continued recognition by DARD of the problems caused within the rural population due to Social Isolation. FRCN acknowledge the priority areas for intervention listed within the Draft Action Plan under Social Isolation of promoting tolerance; health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers and through our long established work within rural communities agree that these are valid and worthwhile Priority Areas for Intervention.

Poor Mental Health and well-being is an issue that has major impacts within rural communities given the fact that many people are living in isolated circumstances often on their own or with limited family and / or community connections.
The farming community is also a grouping who have been demonstrated to have poor mental health as they are facing increasing stresses of managing their businesses mostly working on an individual basis with limited opportunities to engage with others. Many of the LRSN's and organisations supported by them, are engaged in delivering mental health and wellbeing programmes over the last ten years, all of these programmes have been externally evaluated and have shown excellent results in improving local mental health and wellbeing. Any new pilot programmes delivered under the new framework need to take into consideration the knowledge and learning of the evaluations.

One concern that FRCN would have is that by naming the priority as _'promote positive mental health and wellbeing'_ rather than '_promoting positive health and wellbeing';_ interventions could be limited in their scope to secure engagement by rural dwellers. There is still a stigma around mental health in rural areas and people would be more likely to engage with activities that are seen to be about general health and wellbeing, people in many instances would not want to be identified through participating in activities as someone who has mental health issue. If people are at least attracted to an activity the issue of mental health can then be addressed.

Therefore Fermanagh Rural Community Network welcome the example initiatives listed as they list 'Support for health and wellbeing activities' as well as 'Support the promotion of mental health awareness and actions' and we ask that the learning and evidence from positive work that has been undertaken with rural communities through the LRSN's, Healthy Living Centres, other Community, Voluntary and Statutory bodies on these actions and activities are used when drawing up plans for initiatives to support under the new TRPSI framework.

Fermanagh Rural Community Network would welcome actions that will support the rural population to improve their health and wellbeing particularly those activities that are operated and provided at local facilities and venues.

FRCN welcome that _'increase opportunities for social engagement'_ is listed as a priority area of intervention as the value of people of all ages within rural communities being given the opportunity to engage with others on a social basis cannot be underestimated. It is through these social activities that the aim of "promote tolerance, health, wellbeing and inclusion' can be best achieved within rural communities as by bringing people together they are getting to know each other.

This is needed within communities as in many instances during their working and education lives many members of rural communities are away from the community during the day and thus have limited opportunities to engage with others. It is only though actual engagement in the same physical space that tolerance can be promoted and this is especially important in rural communities as due to low numbers of people activities are best organised to attract as many members of the population as possible so that a sufficient number of people attend to make an activity viable. Therefore anything that can be done to encourage use of community facilities that have been traditionally associated as belonging to one section of the community would be welcome. Such venues can become hubs for social inclusion activities within rural communities.

Many venues within rural communities require some level of work to ensure that they are brought up to a condition so that they are accessible and suitable to be used to provide activities that address social isolation.

FRCN welcome the inclusion of *'support community capacity'* as an example initiative as a capable and effective local community infrastructure is of vital importance to the fabric of life within rural communities and those involved in organisations within local communities are largely undertaking this role on a voluntary basis. These organisations require ongoing community development support to continue their operations on an effective and efficient basis and become involved in projects that will address poverty and social isolation at a local level within rural communities.

The community development support work delivered by the Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks resourced under the previous TRPSI Framework has been very effective in ensuring the survival and continued operation of local community infrastructure. This community infrastructure of the LRSN's working in partnership with organisations located within local rural communities has also ensured that many of the other initiatives supported under TRPSI have been effective at reaching into rural communities and tackling poverty and social isolation.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

> Fermanagh Rural Community Network would welcome the resourcing of actions to plan and coordinate the effective operation of activities that would address social isolation. This would involve a resource of a person to co-ordinate activities and associated resource budget to cover some of the costs of operating activities particularly trialling new and innovative activities on a pilot basis. This would ensure that activities are operated on a coordinated and effective basis, securing sufficient numbers, building linkages within and between communities, duplication is avoided, gaps in provision of social inclusion activities are identified and tackled.
>
> The ongoing work within the FRCN, other LRSN's and their delivery of the MARA project has clearly demonstrated that there is a significant issue around mental health problems in homes, particularly depression and loneliness. The framework would provide an excellent opportunity to design a pilot project that would take advantage of the excellent community development model that we have that could be harnessed to deliver a programme to enable rural dwellers to avail of resources to assist them to overcome loneliness and seek help with other mental health conditions. The programme could be designed to ensure a rural community response is adopted to encourage self-help and self-care.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

 Please provide comments in the box below

> The resources provided through the current TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor for rural organisations such as Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks through delivery of the Rural Community Development Support Service Contract in terms ensuring rural proofing, levering-in vital resources to rural areas, and enabling effective implementation of the TRPSI Framework throughout the region.
>
> Making Strategic Facilitation a reality: the TRPSI Framework is vital to ensuring that rural needs are addressed by the government in a localised and joined-up way that reaches the most vulnerable and those most in need.
>
> The successor TRPSI Framework would not only enable much greater utilisation of financial resources, but also would combine the expertise of public sector bodies, and the private, voluntary and community sectors to create greater economies of scale in terms utilising all available knowledge, skills and capacity. This in turn maximises innovation and enables increased access to those most in need and those who are most difficult to reach an excellent example being the MARA Project which has reached out to almost 15,000 households.
>
> TRPSI has been vital in ensuring that _rural_ gets its fair share in terms of community

development via a high quality networking infrastructure and Rural Community Development Support Service that is provided by locally based staff across the region.

The DARD Rural Micro-Capital Grants Programme delivered on-the-ground by FRCN and the other Local Rural Support Networks, have been essential to ensuring capital investment reaches the smallest and lowest capacity rural groups throughout the entire region.

The additional financial leverage over the last four years from the Local Rural Support Networks alone in terms of additional programmes, projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability, capacity etc.) is £56 million.

FRCN and the other LRSNs have undertaken a central role of assisting the successful establishment of the new Local Action Groups for the 2014-2020 NI Rural Development Programme, ensuring comprehensive community representation and engagement.

9) **How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?**

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework could play a key role in the delivery of local Council Community Plans via the TRPSI funded Rural Community Development Support Service which can facilitate the ongoing involvement of the Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) in the community planning process. The foundations for the delivery of Community Planning already exist within the local Council areas through the LRSN's and their vast network of community based organisations – Community Planning should build upon these existing structures. The delivery of Community Planning within the local Council areas will require the engagement of existing and emerging partnerships working collaboratively. The well-established and proven track record of the LRSN's could well be effective resources in such a delivery process. It is imperative that the development of Community Planning includes the continuing engagement of such current resources so as agreed delivery structures for Community Planning are adopted that act as wider collaborative forums for the benefit of the communities that they will ultimately serve.

During the past 4 years FRCN and the other LRSN's have delivered, under the current TRPSI Framework, a Rural Community Development Support Service to a wide range of rural organisation & groups including within the Fermanagh and Omagh area a dedicated service for groups from within the Unionist Community.
This has proven to be an effective model and partnership for the delivery of such services and the LRSN's, with continued support from the TRPSI programme, are therefore well placed to assist local Councils in the delivery of community planning over the next number of years due to the following factors:
• Strong partnership & links with the rural community already in place
• Added value from funding leverage from other programmes
• Already working closely with DARD to deliver services including the development of the NI Rural Development Programme (2014-2020)

The delivery structures for the Community Planning process within local Councils must

therefore take account of existing rural structures & delivery organisations so as to ensure there is less fragmentation of implementation groups and integration of the various locally focused Action Plans.

This will ensure that the Community Planning process will effectively serve the priority needs of the rural community; the ongoing support of DARD for the rural community development sector at a local and district council area level through the TRPSI framework is crucial to this.

10) **Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:**

(vii) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) / Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to contribute, develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation.

FRCN and the other LRSNs welcome a localised approach to the design and delivery of measures, which effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas in line with the key principles of the Framework.

The LRSNs are advantageously neutral to central and local government ensuring that all rural communities can access resources, services and programmes in a timely manner regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation or disability. The LRSNs ensure Section 75 information is recorded in line with procedures under International Quality Standard ISO 9001:2008 and kept securely in keeping with Data Protection Legislation.

(viii) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) / Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to ensure the TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor ensuring rural proofing and enabling effective implementation positive direct impact on the vulnerable in rural communities through a localised infrastructure. In the last four years this locally based representative infrastructure of the LRSN's has empowered some 15,000 individuals, including the hardest to reach, socially isolated and most vulnerable of the population in Northern Ireland.

Delivering capacity building programmes within rural areas to encourage and ensure participation in the other TRPSI supported programmes and the Rural Development Programme.

Undertaking the delivery of the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households directly impacting on their quality of life.

FRCN and the other LRSNs have also been successful in additional leverage, which has had positive indirect impacts. For example the LRSNs have rolled out projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability) equating to over £56million in the last four years. All of these measures support the delivery of key services for rural dwellers to avail of and have indirectly helped to tackle social isolation and the related mental health connotations that come with this.
The central and neutral role that Fermanagh Rural Community Network and the other LRSNs deliver; give local services for local people and ensure active local community participation in delivering actions supported under the TRPSI Framework.

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

Consumer Council response to the Public Consultation on Proposals for a Successor to DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework 2011-15

January 2016

1. Introduction

1.1. The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (the Consumer Council) is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland (NI) consumers.

1.2. Our primary statutory remit to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers and have specific functions in relation to energy, water, transport, post and food. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers.

1.3. In these areas, we are to have particular regard to consumers:
- Who are disabled or chronically sick;
- Of pensionable age;
- With low incomes; or
- Who reside in rural areas.

2. Consultation Questions

1) Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?

Yes

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

> The Framework fits within the Consumer Council's statutory requirement to give special regard to promoting and safeguarding the interest of low income consumers and those living in rural areas.

The Consumer Council welcomes DARD's partnership approach, particularly in the context of multi-departmental responsibility on the issues covered by the framework and the number of stakeholders involved.

2) Do you agree that the three Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?

Yes

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

The Consumer Council agrees with the three Priority Areas set out in the new TRPSI Framework. Our proposal will cover all three areas as follows:

- Access Poverty fall under our Transport and Postal Services policy work;
- Financial Poverty is addressed through our work on Energy and Money Affairs policy; and
- Social Isolation activities can be supported and complemented through our Consumer Skills and Outreach work.

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

Yes

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The Consumer Council supports the proposed Key Principles. In particular we welcome the key principle to 'encourage partnership

> working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector' and the outcomes based approach.

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

Yes

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

> The Consumer Council supports the adoption of a flexible approach within the Framework to identify and target vulnerable groups. This is important in the context of reduction in the provision of public transport services and changes to post offices and closure of bank branches that are likely to continue throughout the life of the new framework.
>
> Access to up to date and robust data is essential to help identify and target additional groups. For example, the publication of the new House Condition Survey by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will provide updated fuel poverty figures. The Council is prepared to share with DARD any research that we commision and that may be valuable.

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan will be in addressing Access Poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas

No Comment

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address Access Poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas

- Access to banks

Over 30% of bank branches in NI have closed since 2012. People in NI use branches regularly, with 68% of those who bank in branch stating that they visit once a month or more often.

Although banks are keen to promote the use of online banking as an alternative service, consumers here have lower levels of financial capability than elsewhere in the UK and lag behind in terms of online usage. Only 51% of people (compared to the UK average of 57%) choose to bank in this way .

A significant number of consumers in NI do not have access to any kind of banking facility. , The Consumer Council plan to work with providers, their representative bodies and Government to encourage them to reach this segment of the market. As part of this initiative we will be working with the Department for Communities. It would be helpful to discuss this work with DARD with a specific focus on how rural consumers access financial services.

- Alternative access to banking services

With increasing levels of bank closures there is scope for credit

unions and post offices to play a bigger role in serving low-income and financially excluded groups. As many closures affect rural communities, it would be helpful if DARD representatives would meet with the Consumer Council to discuss a report that we will publish on financial exclusion this year. This will give more insight into how Credit Unions and Post Offices can play a bigger role in providing money transmission services.

Post Offices provide a transaction service for customers who have current accounts with nearly all of the banks who operate in NI. This allows consumers to lodge and withdraw cash and lodge cheques.

We would therefore encourage DARD to liaise closely with Post Office Limited to scope opportunities for how they can mutually support consumers in rural areas and by consequence the post office netwok in rural areas.

- Access to cash machines

The Consumer Council works closely with LINK who provide a cash machine network and have so far achieved the installation of 16 new free to use cash machines into lower income areas, both urban and rural across NI in the past two years. We continue to map potential areas of need and would be happy to share the information with DARD or work with DARD in identifying specific areas of need.

- Postal Services

The Framework should consider how it can make use of the Post Office network. The post office network has 480 branches across the province with over two-thirds (68%) located in rural communities. Our analysis shows that 79% of the rural population are within 3 miles of a post office and 98% are within 5 miles of a post office. This means post offices have a significant presence in rural areas.

The network provides access to a wide range of key services important to more vulnerable groups and can help with the three key areas for intervention detailed in the draft action plan.

A report by our predecessor organisation shows that older consumers, those on lower incomes and those with a disability tend to be more reliant on the postal service. Research shows post offices continue to play an important role in other areas of consumers' lives:

- Those living in rural areas more likely to visit their local post office to collect benefits or pensions (21% compared to 17%) or to use the ATM inside the post office (11% compared to 8%) compared to those living in urban areas.
- A third (33%) of those with a disability, including in rural areas, access pensions and benefits at the post office.

Rural post offices can help with the Access Poverty priority by maintaining rural consumers' access to key services and acting as a digital bridge to those not online. This can help during the transition period while broad solutions are being developed. The network has the potential to assist the Framework in achieving its desired outcome.

The Consumer Council would encourage implementation of local measures which will help these branches. The Welsh Government and Scottish Government have targeted interventions in the past towards their respective Post Office networks through financial support in the form of Diversification Funds. A similar approach here will help rural consumers benefit from a more sustainable network. This was recognised by the NI assembly that passed a motion encouraging increased support from the NI Executive to help sustain post offices. This included by establishing a post office diversification fund similar to those which have existed in other regions.

- Transport

The Consumer Council welcomes the Framework's continued recognition of the important role that access to public transport has to play in tackling access poverty and social exclusion and the associated financial burden linked to transport in areas where there is insufficient public transport.

The Consumer Council has conducted a number of different pieces of research from 2011 to 2014 which conclude passenger transport services are a lifeline for many rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability.

The research has also identified a need to develop an integrated approach to transport from all sectors providing transport including Translink, community transport, education and heath transport and taxis to ensure services meet the needs of young people in rural areas.

The Consumer Council has recommended that the relevant departments should develop a co-ordinated strategic approach to transport. We are aware that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) are leading on working group looking at how to better integrate transport services. We recommend DARD work with DRD in its efforts to improve urban-rural linkages through the provision of better transport.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan will be in addressing Financial Poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas

No comment.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address Financial Poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas

- Energy

  According to the most recent official statistics , 50% of households living in rural areas are in fuel poverty, compared to 42% overall in NI. Therefore, the Consumer Council welcomes the Framework's commitment to support household energy efficiency improvement initiatives.

  Given the high level of fuel poverty in rural areas, it is essential that consumers are aware of the significant savings they can personally achieve on their energy bills by a combination of the following:

    - Switching electricity supplier;
    - Shopping around for home heating oil; and
    - Joining an oil buying club.

  The Consumer Council has produced a number of resources for consumers such as the electricity price comparison table, the weekly home heating oil price survey and our Switch On information guides. We continue to promote these through our outreach work.

We would welcome the opportunity to work closer with DARD to further disseminate this important information amongst rural consumers.

- Postal Services

The draft action plan for 2016 -17 details 'support and promote employability, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities' as part of this priority. There are 480 post offices in NI with 68% located in rural communities and the significant majority are privately owned small businesses. Many rural branches are defined as community branches and represent the last shop in the community. This helps to highlight the economic importance of the network by improving employment and entrepreneurship activities within rural areas.

It is equally important to consider the access to the wide range of key services such as pensions and benefits, cash, transactional banking facilities and bill payments services which post offices provide. This contributes to the example initiative which captures 'supporting access to benefits'. As already highlighted, rural consumers' access benefits through the Post Office Card Account (POCA) which is of particular significance to those living in the rural west as identified in the consultation document .

We would therefore encourage DARD to liaise closely with Post Office Limited to scope opportunities for how it can mutually

> support consumers in rural areas and by consequence the sustainability of the post office netwok in these communities.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing Social Isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas

No Comment

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address Social Isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas

> - Consumer Skills
>
> Informing and Empowering consumers is central to the work of the Consumer Council. We carry out this function with special emphasis on rural areas and vulnerable groups such older people and those with disabilities throught a number of outreach activities. There are two main benefits from this:
>
>   - Our research shows[1] that consumers who understand their rights and are confident to complain when things go wrong could be £225 better off annually; and
>   - Providing support to frontline workers and groups at risk of social isolation.
>
> We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our outreach

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[1] Consumer Proficiency research 2015 due for publication in March 2016.

12

activities with DARD officials in the context of contributing to the delivery of the objective and outputs of the Framework.

- Postal Services

Many consumers, including those in rural areas, already view post offices as rural hubs. Previous research shows 78% of consumers, including those in rural areas, feel their local post office plays an active role in enhancing community relations. Additionally 93% feel it is a trusted institution. This illustrates the positive social impact of the network.

The Ballygally Post Office is an example of the role post office play in helping with social inclusion activities. It operates from a premise which has a community hall for social events and activities throughout the year which benefits rural consumers. This represents an innovative approach which can help achieve some of the outcomes described in the draft action plan. The Framework could consider similar approaches in other rural parts of NI as part of its pilot initiatives.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this response in more detail please do not hesitate to contact Kathy Graham, Director of Policy, on 028 90251636 or via email on Kathy.Graham@consumercouncil.org.uk.

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Proposals for a Successor to DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework.

Disability Action's Response
January 2016

Any enquiry concerning this document should be made to
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INTRODUCTION

1   Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity working with and for people with disabilities. We work with our members to provide information, training, transport awareness programmes and representation for people regardless of their disability; whether that is physical, mental, sensory, hidden or learning disability.

2   21% of adults and 6% of children living in private households in Northern Ireland have a disability and the incidence is one of the highest in the United Kingdom.

3   As a campaigning body, we work to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community. In pursuit of our aims we serve 45,000 people each year.

4   Our network of services is provided via our Headquarters in Belfast and in three regional offices in Carrickfergus, Derry and Dungannon.

5   Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this paper.

SPECIFIC COMMENTARY

6   Disability Action welcomes that the Department has made information available in different formats. However, the easy read version of the consultation is not in an appropriate format. Easy read format should include pictures to support the meaning of the text. The text should also be in plain English to ensure that the person understands the meaning of the document.

7   Section 2.3 (page 5) makes reference to TRPSI framework complementing the Delivering Social Change Framework. However, the vulnerable groups outlined do not include people with disabilities. The Disability Strategy is the primary document on DSC in relation to disability, and further considerations should be given by DARD as to how it could help support the delivery of the strategic outcomes under the Disability Strategy. For example, on of the key issues for people with disabilities is access to transport, particularly in rural areas. Lack of access to suitable

and affordable transport impacts on an individual's ability to live independently in their community.

8   Section 4.5 (page 9/10) states that people with disabilities experience particular difficulties in relation to accessing transport due to an inability to drive or lack of access to car.   Access issues to not just relate to access to a car but also access to accessible and regular public transport.

9   Section 4.8 (page 10) correctly indicates access to childcare as a barrier. Access to accessible childcare for children with disabilities is particularly difficult in rural areas. Therefore, any consideration of actions under this area should include ensuring the accessibility of childcare provision for children with disabilities.

10   Section 6.2 (page 14) the objectives states partnership working with the rural community sector. However, organisations such as Disability Action may not be seen as a rural organisation due to being based in an urban area, however, many of the services we provide are provided as outreach in rural areas. For example, our Age No Barrier Programme (funded by the Big Lottery) has been working to reduce social isolation of older people in rural areas. Therefore for innovative partnerships to be inclusive the terminology could be widened to the community and voluntary sector.

11   The Department should also give consideration to how it could include programmes funded through non-government funding to see how they could be mainstreamed and address the priorities under the framework.

12   Section 6.3 (page 15/16) sets out the intended outcomes but does not give any reference to how these are to be measured or what they are to be measured against.

13   Section 6.4 - 6.7 (pages 16/17). Disability Action welcomes the priorities set out but would recommend that accessibility is added to each outcome to ensure that all programmes are accessible to disabled people, regardless if they are a specific target group.

14. Section 6.8 (page 17 - viii) states that the framework will promote equality and good relations in line with the Departments duties under Section 75. However, the Evaluation of DARD's TRPSI

Framework 2011-2015 undertaken by the Social Investment Fund stated (page 3) that "Also, there is no formal process for monitoring the impact of TRPSI on Section 75 Groups".

Disability Action welcomes that (page 25) states that individual programmes funded under the successor to TPRSI will be monitored under equality at the earliest opportunity. However, we would recommend that programmes being funded include information on how they will ensure that the provide equality of opportunity to all the groups under S75. The programmes should then be required to monitor the equality of their programme.

13   Disability Action welcomes that the proposed framework will have the flexibility to address a wide range of groups and in particular that people with disabilities have been recognised as target group. (Section 6.9, Page 18/19).

14   In relation to implementation, monitoring and evaluation (page 19), Disability Action would strongly recommend that a set of indicators are developed that will measure progress on each area. Quantitative data and qualitative data should used to enable the outcomes of actions and programmes to be fully evaluated. Baseline indicators would help in measuring the progress on implementation beyond specific actions.

15   The draft action plan (page 21) should include accessibility for people with disabilities in each priority area to ensure that all initiatives have accessibility built into them from the start.

16   The action plan on social inclusion (page 21) should go beyond 'promotion' of positive mental health and wellbeing, the measurement of such an action would be difficult to measure in terms of how it has addressed social isolation.

Conclusion

Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and looks forward to further engagement as the programme develops.

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

SOUTH ANTRIM COMMUNITY NETWORK

Title Miss ☐

Surname

KERR

Forename

WENDY

2. Postal Address

UNIT 6/7 ARCHES HOUSE
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RANDALSTOWN

Postcode BT42 1PN	**Phone** 028 9447 8645	**Email** wendy@southantrimcommunitynetwork.org

Consultation Questions

1) **Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?**

☐ **Yes**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

South Antrim Community Network as one of nine Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures in hundreds of rural villages and communities to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. Although not clearly highlighted in some of the TRPSI consultation papers, it has been acknowledged by all stakeholders (from The Minister and the ARD Committee to local groups) that all the other TRPSI measures in the current programme were dependent on a solid and responsive rural community infrastructure across NI. The LRSNs have worked closely with DARD for over 20 years to put that infrastructure in place and that is the reason so many of the TRPSI measures have been so successful.

For example, in recent months the Rural Capital Micro Grant Programme has been promoted for DARD by the LRSNs and 2 phases have been rolled out to small rural groups in every part of rural NI. The programme has been oversubscribed and highly effective in targeting small grants at the most needy groups, helping them to deliver a wide range of local rural services. The MARA programme, Farm Families Health Checks and the promotion of Library services have all exceeded their targets thanks in large part to the promotional and organisational abilities and reach of the LRSNs. A local presence and knowledge of the area is to key to successful delivery.

This experience linked to the hundreds of rural groups and thousands of individuals associated with the LRSNs means that the Networks can help DARD to meet the objectives set in section 6 "Proposals for a successor Framework post 2016". Together with other rural stakeholders, we can "promote the development of new and innovative pilot approaches to TRPSI AND encourage effective partnership working AND effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas".

2) Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?

☒   **Yes**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

South Antrim Community Network as one of nine Local Rural Support Networks believe that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework as they are still relevant in 2016, encapsulate the varying needs of the rural community and encompass a service deliverability which can be most effectively demonstrated through a local or sub regional level approach.

The identification and successful delivery of various projects and programmes within these priorities would continue to bring greatest positive impact to the needs of those experiencing rural poverty and isolation. The priorities allow for a bottom-up community development approach in not only identifying relevant needs but also in delivering upon them using a cascade approach. It is our view that the most effective TRPSI programmes delivered to date have had a strong community ethos and process coupled with local knowledge access to where rural, social and economic needs are most prevalent. Invariably, there will be different levels of need in different geographical areas, however, as the nature of community sector delivery is designed sub regionally and is based on pertinent local needs then those most in poverty or experiencing isolation have less probability in remaining outside the reach of these priorities and programmes.

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework and it's priorities to date has been an excellent package of funding aimed at supporting vulnerable people and targeting the root causes of social isolation. As programmes take effect and outputs deliver meaningful change there are indeed necessary modifications within the themes or priorities which are required to continue to make most impact on the frameworks aims whilst external factors such as austerity and public budget finance availability will also determine and prioritize future considerations.

It is our view that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework since programmes can emerge from these themes which meet best the local community

needs.

TRPSI and the priorities has now gained substantial traction and is now recognised as an essential brand which has made a huge difference to rural communities and which is complementary to the NIRDP. Many of the issues these priorities have tackled to date were previously hidden and would fall outside the remit of other mainstream funding programmes. There remains, however, continued challenges, needs and rural TRPSI issues which require on-going support at various levels of intervention and which would still come under these 3 priorities.

The Rural Community Development Support Service currently delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks, as a model of support to TRPSI, is most certainly envied throughout communities in Europe as a model leader in balancing appropriate and measured interventions to social, economic and access poverty issues at a community level. Promoting Community development at a local/sub regional ensures that Regional programmes are delivered effectively at the local level and access to the real needs and issues of communities is provided for. Supporting access to good governance, to economic and social poverty in communities; the service as provided by these local community based networks has proved an invaluable resource to the delivery of the TRPSI framework.

These experienced local stakeholders have good working relationships with all other TRPSI delivery agents and indeed share a direct role in elements of their success making essential and valuable linkages and connections at sub regional and local levels. The key management role of DARD in direct delivery of this programme has proved to be most effective in ensuring that the networks could assist DARD to manage Regional programmes at local levels and to balance approaches necessary to ensuring programme priority themes reached the community sector using bottom up approaches.

The local access support provided to DARDs Modernisation programme and its Rural Micro Capital Grants programmes, as and when required by DARD, evidence how this infrastructure can react and respond to changing rural needs and requirements. Their modus operandi for the delivery of programmes such as MARA are a testament to the Community Development approach which ensures participation and access to hidden and real needs at a local level across all 3 main priorities.

The networking function plays an invaluable role in achieving key community participation at all necessary levels from village planning facilitation to rural proofing consultation. With the reform of local Government, Community Planning, and the mandatory Charities registration requirements; these networks provide local mentoring support and guidance, technical support and facilitation at grassroots level to those rural communities most in need under the programme priorities of Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation. Most importantly, they can identify what local pertinent needs fit the programme.

We believe that it the approaches taken under the overlying programme priorities which provide the appropriate lynchpins to ensure leverage of many other programmes and projects into rural areas and which have included such as community mental health awareness, capital build infrastructural programmes, rural tourism, lifelong learning, social investment, migrant support etc. These programmes operate in a time of decentralisation and digitization of services, the closing of rural banks, post offices, schools and other services and thus during a time when the greatest need for local people to provide adequate solutions to their own issues and problems within a community development approach. The 3 themes adequately allow for local communities, sub regional and innovative approach making to meeting rural TRPI needs.

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

☒   **Yes**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The rural support organisations delivering the DARD Rural Support programme agree with the key TRPSI principles as outlined in the framework document. Historically Local Rural Support Networks successfully delivered pilot, innovative projects and interventions collaboratively and in partnership with statutory and other community and voluntary organisations and are widely perceived as the link between grass roots community groups operating at a local level with regional statutory bodies.

Positive outcomes of a collaborative approach to the delivery of services aimed at addressing rural poverty and isolation issues include:
-    Ensures the socially isolated and those with financial related issues have access and opportunities to avail of support services
-    Increases the capacity of designated rural support organisations and grass roots community groups to collectively and with greater efficiency deliver both services and support interventions that may not be possible if delivered in isolation.

A negative outcome of delivering a successful pilot or innovative project is the lack of funding to effectively mainstream the service or project. Increased opportunities to continue or mainstream projects that have demonstrated effectiveness should be a key objective of a future TRPSI framework both for addressing poverty and social isolation issues and having to avoid dealing with the expectation when a service or project ceases.

Local Rural Support Networks will continue to be a conduit to disseminate information on key government strategies to the community voluntary sector through their established communication channels and will continue to lobby and be the 'voice' of the rural community sector during discussions with statutory and governmental organisations e.g. Rural Development Programme and Community Planning.

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

☒ **Yes**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

South Antrim Community Network as one of nine Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) welcome the proposal that the successor Framework would be open to a wider range of target groups. As an infrastructure providing community development support to the rural community across Northern Ireland for many years, we have, almost without exception, worked with all these vulnerable groups.

We particularly welcome the introduction of the working poor and the under employed. The continuing economic uncertainty has left many families in difficult financial circumstances. One or both parents are working however income levels fall below what they need to have a meaningful quality of life. A sudden change in circumstances, such as marital breakup or ill health, can have further detrimental consequences and lead to social exclusion and poverty.

Mental health still retains a significant stigma, particularly in rural areas, and many of the LRSN's run programmes which directly tackle mental ill health in their communities. Statistics show that one in four run the risk of mental ill health thus their inclusion in this framework is essential.

The inclusion of the LGBT community in the framework is also welcome. Whilst members of the LGBT community live in rural areas they tend to meet and socialise in their nearest town. However LRSN's have a role to play in supporting them to remain in their community and in ensuring statutory organisations and the wider public are aware of the issues affecting them.

Perhaps one omission from the list of vulnerable groups is men. Whilst accepted that most farmers are men there may be male rural dwellers who are not farmers. Globally, the gap between male and female life expectancy and healthy life expectancy has widened in the last 40 years and is expected to get even bigger by 2030. Research commissioned by the Priory Group of 1,000 men found that: 77% of men polled have suffered with anxiety / stress / depression; the biggest pressures in

men's life are work (32%), finance (31%) and health (23%); the majority of men claim their mental health is having a negative impact on their work performance, parenting ability and relationships; 40% of men polled said it would take thoughts of suicide or self-harm to compel them to seek professional help.

(www.priorygroup.com/blog/mentalhealth/-i-ve-learnt-to-deal-with-it---40-of-men-won-t-talk-to-anyone-about-their-mentalhealth)

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

We are pleased to welcome the measures in the draft Framework. Many of the proposed measures will go a long way to tackle issues that blight so many rural dwellers. We appreciate that the list of groups is not exhausted. Women, Farmers, People on work on low incomes (the working poor), children and young people, older people and Ethnic Minorities and immigrants, People with low skills or low levels of education et al. Our experience shows that some of the groups need to be broken down into subgroups.

For example there are sections of the farming industry that have seen their incomes severely cut in the last two years (dairy Farmers). Future prices in this industry predict another 10% drop in the next three months. Mental health in this area gives us great cause for concern. This is evidenced by the increase calls to help lines, up by 30% in the last year.

Many Ethnic Minorities are finding it difficult to assimilate, especially those living in the rural community. There are a number of factors that drive this. Some Ethnic groups neither have English as their first or second language; this communication barrier reinforces isolation and is a contributing factor in poor mental health. Those who have a strong grasp of the English language find it easier to "fit in". This also is a factor in this section being "excepted". In conclusion we think this group of Ethnic

minorities should be broken down into sections not exclusively into language sections. I.e. short to medium dwellers who may seasonal workers.

We are pleased with the other target groups and we welcome that people with low skills and low levels of education might have a chance to enhance their employability. The training involved to up skill this group will act as a medium to tackle social isolation. Many who suffer from social isolation either don't recognise their plight or only recognise it when their horizons broaden due to intervention from an un-proscribed source. I.e. further education either social education or accredited.

The "Outcomes based pilot programmes" is also most welcome. This allows delivery agents latitude to make informed researched based decisions that will go to the hart rural poverty and social isolation.

Under 6.8 V we strongly concur with the mainstreaming of successful pilot projects. The Department launch the Rural Community Micro Grants 2015-2016. We in the Rural Support Networks found this reached parts of the rural community that that had gone under the radar in the past. This has opened a pathway for community development that goes to the core of TRPSI policy. This merges into 6VII "sustainability". Some groups for the first time now see a pathway using community a development approach with the support of the Networks. 6.8 X The sharing of information and best practice learning between organisations has the potential that prevents groups trying to "reinventing the wheel" and will avoid duplication between organisations.

6.8 XI The community planning and the consultation process will be key, both in a strategic and a complementary role. It is imperative that at all stages of the community planning that the rural voice is heard and well represented. The Networks will play an enabling role to ensure events are well attended and the TRPSI policy principles are promoted.

6.8 VIII Good Relations being promoted. There will be many opportunities to develop innovative partnerships, PEACEIV et al. One should not underestimate the incidental "good relations" through the Rural Development programme. The carrot and stick approach for single identity group has been proven to open halls to a wider diaspora. Not only does this lead to better community relations but adds to the sustainability of the halls.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Rural Community Micro Grants opened many new doors because it gave an incentive for tangible assets to be acquired for the benefit of a particular group. For many this has been the first time in making a funding application. The benefits not only include the asset but their governance has now been under the spotlight and sharpened to enable their participation. We would propose an extenuation of this innovative idea. The structure used to deliver the grants is now well established, this same structure could deliver small capitol grants say up to £10,000 for basic needs that so many halls throughout the country need.

Community transport should be reviewed to widen its scope. Longer journeys should be considered that travel between a number of service providers.

Evidence indicates that there is an appetite for computer training in rural areas. The LRSNs could deliver this service. There used to be an outreach service from the regional Colleges, we don't advocate for its return. The service that they provided no longer is fit for propose. Farmers and rural dwellers want a basic standard of training that may not necessarily be accredited. The end result would be Farmers having the ability to make online returns. Farm families coming together braking social isolation and have a greater understanding of the world wide web.

Greater use and the promotion of Luncheon Clubs in rural areas could provide a service that; tackles social isolation, helps sustain a target audience, increases the sustainability of rural halls. All this combined adds to the cohesion of rural communities.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Financial poverty refers to the measure of the degree to which people face the risk of serious deprivation in terms of their standard of living or to which they fall below a specified minimum level of resources. Through the measures in the draft action plan there is the opportunity to raise the standard of living for those people living in rural areas. Particularly in regard to addressing issues such as rural transport which is currently a major issue which prohibits many rural dwellers from accessing essential basic services. In addition measures targeted at supporting household energy efficiency improvement & the introduction of new employability and entrepreneurship opportunities are also to be welcomed.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Other measures which may alleviate financial poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas include the creation of jobs through investment in infrastructure such as investment in rural hubs, renovating abandoned housing and broadband infrastructure development, therefore increasing the chances of the young people of rural areas to stay, therefore building a stronger rural economy. With added investment in high quality and affordable childcare and early intervention this will create increased opportunities for jobs.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the continued recognition by DARD of the problems caused within the rural population due to Social Isolation. We acknowledge the priority areas for intervention listed within the Draft Action Plan under Social Isolation of promoting tolerance, health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers and through our long established work within rural communities agree that these are valid and worthwhile Priority Areas for Intervention.

Poor Mental Health and well-being is an issue that has major impacts within rural communities given the fact that many people are living in isolated circumstances often on their own or with limited family and / or community connections.
The farming community is also a grouping who have been demonstrated to have poor mental health as they are facing increasing stresses of managing their businesses mostly working on an individual basis with limited opportunities to engage with others. Many of the LRSN's are engaged in delivering mental health and wellbeing programmes over the last ten years, all of these programmes have been externally evaluated and have shown excellent results in improving local mental health and wellbeing. Any new pilot programmes delivered under the new framework need to take into consideration the knowledge and learning of the evaluations.

One concern that the LRSN's would have that by naming the priority as _'promote positive mental health and wellbeing'_ rather than '_promoting positive health and wellbeing';_ interventions could be limited in their scope to secure engagement by rural dwellers. There is still a stigma around mental health in rural areas and people would be more likely to engage with activities that are seen to be about general health and wellbeing, people in many instances would not want to be identified through participating in activities as someone who has mental health issue. If people are at least attracted to an activity the issue of mental health can then be addressed.

Therefore as LRSN's we do welcome the example initiatives listed as they list 'Support for health and wellbeing activities' as well as 'Support the promotion of mental health awareness and actions' and we ask that the learning and evidence from positive work that has been undertaken with rural communities through the

LRSN's, Healthy Living Centres, other Community, Voluntary and Statutory bodies on these actions and activities are used when drawing up plans for initiatives to support under the new TRPSI framework.

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome actions that will support the rural population to improve their health and wellbeing particularly those activities that are operated and provided at local facilities and venues.

The LRSN's welcome that *'increase opportunities for social engagement'* is listed as a priority area of intervention as the value of people of all ages within rural communities being given the opportunity to engage with others on a social basis cannot be underestimated. It is through these social activities that the aim of "promote tolerance, health, wellbeing and inclusion' can be best achieved within rural communities as by bringing people together they are getting to know each other. This is needed within communities as in many instances during their working and education lives many members of rural communities are away from the community during the day and thus have limited opportunities to engage with others. It is only though actual engagement in the same physical space that tolerance can be promoted and this is especially important in rural communities as due to low numbers of people activities are best organised to attract as many members of the population as possible so that a sufficient number of people attend to make an activity viable. Therefore anything that can be done to encourage use of community facilities that have been traditionally associated as belonging to one section of the community would be welcome. Such venues can become hubs for social inclusion activities within rural communities.

Many venues within rural communities require some level of work to ensure that they are brought up to a condition that they are accessible and suitable to be used to provide activities that address social isolation.

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the inclusion of *'support community capacity'* as an example initiative as a capable and effective local community infrastructure is of vital importance to the fabric of life within rural communities and those involved in organisations within local communities are largely undertaking this role on a voluntary basis. These organisations require ongoing community development support to continue their operations on an effective and efficient basis

and become involved in projects that will address poverty and social isolation at a local level within rural communities.

The community development support work delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks resourced under the previous TRPSI Framework has been very effective in ensuring the survival and continued operation of local community infrastructure. This community infrastructure of the LRSN's working in partnership with organisations located within local communities has also ensured that many of the other initiatives supported under TRPSI have been effective at reaching into rural communities and tackling poverty and social isolation.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Social Isolation* among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome the resourcing of actions to plan and coordinate the effective operation of activities that would address social isolation. This would involve a resource of a person to co-ordinate activities and associated resource budget to cover some of the costs of operating activities particularly training new and innovative activities on a pilot basis. This would ensure that activities are operated on a coordinated and effective basis, securing sufficient numbers, building linkages within and between communities, duplication is avoided, gaps in provision of social inclusion activities are identified and tackled.

The ongoing work within the LRSN's and their delivery of the MARA project has clearly demonstrated that there is a significant issue around mental health problems in homes, particularly depression and loneliness. The framework would provide an excellent opportunity to design a pilot project that would take advantage of the excellent community development model that we have that could be harnessed to deliver a programme to enable rural dwellers to avail of resources to assist them to overcome loneliness and seek help with other mental health conditions. The programme could be designed to ensure a rural community response is adopted to encourage self-help and self-care.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor for rural organisations (e.g. the 9 Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) / Rural Community Development Support Service Contract) in terms ensuring rural proofing, levering-in vital resources to rural areas, and enabling effective implementation of the TRPSI Framework throughout the region.

Making Strategic Facilitation a reality: the TRPSI Framework is vital to ensuring that rural needs are addressed by the government in a localised and joined-up way that reaches the most vulnerable and those most in need.

The successor TRPSI Framework would not only enable much greater utilisation of financial resources, but also would combine the expertise of public sector bodies, and the private, voluntary and community sectors to create greater economies of scale in terms utilising all available knowledge, skills and capacity. This in turn maximises innovation and enables increased access to those most in need and those who are most difficult to reach (e.g. the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households).

TRPSI has been vital in ensuring that *rural* gets its fair share in terms of community development via a high quality networking infrastructure and Community Development Support Service that is run by grass roots representatives right across the region.

The DARD Rural Micro-Capital Grants Programme delivered on-the-ground by the 9 Local Rural Support Networks, have been essential to ensuring capital investment reaches the smallest and lowest capacity rural groups throughout the entire region.

The additional financial leverage over the last four years from the Local Rural Support Networks alone in terms of additional programmes, projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability, capacity etc) is £56 million.

The LRSNs have been central to the role of assisting the set-up of the new local Action Groups (NIRDP) and ensuring grass roots community representation.

9) How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework could play a key role in the delivery of local Council Community Plans via the TRPSI funded Rural Community Development Support Service which can facilitate the ongoing involvement of the Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) in the community planning process. The foundations for the delivery of Community Planning already exist within the local Council areas through the LRSN's and their vast network of community based organisations – Community Planning should build upon these existing structures. The delivery of Community Planning within the local Council areas will require the engagement of existing and emerging partnerships working collaboratively. The well-established and proven track record of the LRSN's could well be effective resources in such a delivery process. It is imperative that the development of Community Planning includes the continuing engagement of such current resources so as agreed delivery structures for Community Planning are adopted that act as wider collaborative forums for the benefit of the communities that they will ultimately serve.

During the past 4 years the LRSN's have delivered, under the current TRPSI Framework, a Rural Community Development Support Service to a wide range of rural organisation & groups. This has proven to be an effective model and partnership for the delivery of such services and the LRSN's, with continued support from the TRPSI programme, are therefore well placed to assist local Councils in the delivery of community planning over the next number of years due to the following factors:
• Strong partnership & links with the rural community already in place
• Added value from funding leverage from other programmes
• Already working closely with DARD to deliver services including the development of the NI Rural Development Programme (2014-2020)

The delivery structures for the Community Planning process within local Councils must therefore take account of existing rural structures & delivery organisations so as to ensure there is less fragmentation of implementation groups and integration of the various locally focused Action Plans. This will ensure that the Community Planning process will effectively serve the priority needs of the rural community, the ongoing support of DARD for the rural community development sector at grass roots level through the TRPSI framework is crucial to this.

10) Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:

(ix) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to contribute, develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. The LRSNs welcome a localised approach to the design and delivery of measures which effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas in line with the key principles of the Framework. The LRSNs are advantageously neutral to central and local government ensuring that all rural communities can access resources, services and programmes in a timely manner regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation or disability. The LRSNs ensure Section 75 information is recorded in line with procedures under International Quality Standard ISO 9001:2008 and kept securely in keeping with Data Protection Legislation.

(x) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to ensure the TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor ensuring rural proofing and enabling effective implementation positive direct impact on the vulnerable in rural communities through a localised infrastructure. In the last four years we have empowered some 15,000 individuals, including the hardest to reach, socially isolated and most vulnerable of the population in Northern Ireland. Delivering capacity building programmes within rural areas to encourage and ensure participation in the Rural Development Programme. Undertaking the delivery of the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households directly impacting on their quality of life. The LRSNs have also been successful in additional leverage which has had positive indirect impacts. For example we have rolled out projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability) equating to over £56million in the last four years. All of these measures support the delivery of key services for rural dwellers to avail of and have indirectly helped to tackle social isolation and the related mental health connotations that come with this. The central and neutral role that the LRSNs deliver; give local services for local people and ensure grass roots community representation in rolling out TRPSI Framework.

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Ulster Council GAA

Title Mr ☐   Ms ☐   Mrs ☐   Miss ☐   Dr X☐   **Please tick as appropriate**

Surname

Murphy

Forename

Danny

2. Postal Address

Ulster GAA
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| **Postcode** BT617BX | **Phone** 02837517180 | **Email** ulster@gaa.ie |

Consultation Questions

1) **Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?**

X☐ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

In general Ulster GAA agree with the Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes of the Framework. However, there would be concern relating to the emphasis of 'new and innovative pilot programmes'. There would be concern that not all successfully piloted programmes would be adopted into mainstream funding, as has been found in the past. Therefore it is felt that also considering previously successful projects should be considered in the new round of TRPSI.

2) **Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?**

X☐ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

These are sound Priority Areas

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

X☐   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

These are sound Key Principles

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

X☐   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

These are sound Target Groups

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

As with measures in each of the Priority Areas the measures are sound, however, more detail as to *how* the measures will be achieved is key in predicting if they will be effective.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Urban-rural transport linkages is a vital element of this Priority Area.
Rural Broadband is another key area which needs to be better addressed.

It is felt that TRPSI should take consideration of current rural stakeholders, particularly in the community/voluntary sector, who provide many services in rural areas, and demonstrate excellent value-for-money through many hoirs of voluntary work.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The measures are ambitious, which is welcomed, however, more detail as to _how_ the measures will be achieved is key in predicting if they will be effective.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Affordable childcare is a priority which also has an impact on rural schools. Supporting rural schools should be a key priority which will lend itself to supporting rural enterprise and infrastructure.

Heating and renewable energy are also concerns of existing and new rural facilities which should be taken into consideration in TRPSI.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The measures are sound, however, more detail as to _how_ the measures will be achieved is key in predicting if they will be effective.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Framework needs to acknowledge rural entities which are already doing much to address social isolation, such as GAA clubs. The Framework should provide support to such entities to maximise their effectiveness in reducing social isolation, through developing programmes, facilities, volunteers, and people.

Of note, is Ulster GAA's Social Initiative which is a programme particularly focusing on elderly, lone farmers, particularly males, who have been demonstrated as a group prone to rural isolation. The programme utilises GAA clubs (facilities, volunteers and infrastructure) to organise activities that are attractive to this group in order to increase social interaction of this group. Thus clubs have organised activities such as "card-nights", trips to Croke Park, "Club-history" projects, in order to appeal to elderly rural dwellers. As part of the GAA's health & wellbeing remit clubs are also providing such people with information about keeping well, and are a sign-posting vehicle for people wishing to avail of, or in need of support.

8) **How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?**

Please provide comments in the box below

It is acknowledged that there are many groups / agencies who have in interest in rural issues. However, it is hoped that the successor TRPSI Framework will help to bring-together all service-providers and rural stakeholders in a more stream-lined manner so that duplication can be avoided, and gaps in provision better identified. Ulster GAA appreciates the opportunity to engage with such groups.

Ulster GAA acknowledges that rural issues are not just the responsibility of DARD and welcome DARD's work in bringing about the Rural Proofing Bill, which it hopes will see the deliverance of rural issues across a wider spectrum.

9) **How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?**

Please provide comments in the box below

It is imperative that local councils Community Plans, and the impact of RDP are taken into consideration *before* decisions are made in relations to what projects will be funded through TRPSI. Duplication should be avoided and equally gaps in RDP should be considered for TRPSI.

10) **Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:**

(xi) The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

Ulster GAA welcomes any projects which aim to reduce inequalities for vulnerable groups, particularly the fact the TRPSI may improve rural life for ethnic minorities; elderly, children and young people; LGBT community; women; people with disabilities; and carers and lone parents.

Ulster GAA activities are inclusive of everyone and would welcome support through TRPSI to address all groups, but particularly those vulnerable groups.

As mentioned in 7(b) the GAA's Social Initiative programme has proven to be an effective programme in which to reduce social isolation, particularly in elderly, lone, male farmers.

(xii) The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

Ulster GAA are happy with the Strategic Investment Boards consultation and findings.

11) **Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?**

Please provide comments in the box below

Below are the key points that Ulster GAA which to make:

1. It is important that local council Community Plans and RDP are taken into account *before* TRPSI projects have been decided upon.

2. DARD are to be congratulated on the Rural Proofing Bill, and need to continue to work with other government departments, and statutory agencies to ensure equitable funding for rural projects.

3. A Key Priority, Priority V., is to ensure that successfully piloted schemes receive mainstream funding; however, there are examples of where this has not happened, therefore TRPSI should continue to fund proven projects which can achieve the aims and objectives of TRPSI.

4. The rural community/voluntary sector should continue to play a key role in addressing rural issues, and administration around TRPSI should be flexible enough to allow this sector to avail of TRPSI support where they have a proven record in achieving its aims and objectives.

5. Ulster GAA feel the central theme of TRPSI should be to ensure equality of access to services and support regardless of whether residing in an urban, village, or rural setting.

20 January 2016

Ulster Unionist Party consultation response to the proposals for a successor to DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework 2011-15

The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the opportunity to make a short response to this consultation. We believe the 2011-2015 TRSPI framework played important role to place at tackling rural poverty and social isolation. Specifically there were a number of individual programmes, such as the Farm Families Health Checks Programme, that made a significant and important contribution.

While we note that it is proposed that the budget will be similar to that available under the previous framework, it is disappointing that no budget has still yet been secured for the post-2016 period. In addition we would share the concern previously expressed by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee that budget was for the last financial year was not allocated on need, but rather convenience.

We welcome the fact that the new framework will be delivered in context of the proposed Rural Needs Bill, however we would express disappointment with the unfortunately slow introduction of the Bill which has resulted in this framework being produced in advance of the final legislation being agreed.

We broadly welcome the objectives and intended outcomes of the framework.

Whilst we do appreciate that a rigorous application and review process is held before support is offered, unfortunately it has been found that communities from a traditional Unionist or Protestant background do require additional assistance in applying for and accessing this.

We are concerned that the previous specific support for Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist applicants has not been included in the new framework. The Ulster Unionist Party believes omitting this additional support, which has previously been delivered effectively and efficiently, would be a retrograde step. We note the Department's assertion that the proposed list of vulnerable groups on pages 18&19 of the consultation 'are not prescriptive'. We would therefore call for the reintroduction of the previous PUL support.

There is strong evidence to suggest that not all the PUL need has yet been met. For just one example the overall ratio of Protestant beneficiaries to Catholic beneficiaries in the previous Rural Development Programme was considered low in comparison with the Farmers and Farm Families Survey.

Unionist
Ulster Unionist Party
Doing what's right for Northern Ireland

We would therefore urge the Department to reinstate the programme to ensure that all communities equally avail of the important support from within the new framework.

DARD Consultation on the successor to the TRPSI Programme

·   The priority areas for intervention seem appropriate There is some concern as it is the form the intervention takes that will determine whether or not it is a success

·   We believe Rural Transport is a major issue. The cuts or withdrawal of funding will impact severely on individuals and groups who depend on these transport bodies such as DART to enable them to deliver essential services which help to sustain isolated individuals and communities.

·   There is some overlap with other areas of government, so there is a need to avoid duplication in terms of Health and Education issues

·   In terms of education it is important to recognise the under achievement in the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community. Another report has highlighted the differences in numbers of Protestants and Roman Catholics attending university. This disparity is actually increasing. Government departments need to address these issues as a matter of priority.

·   Libraries in terms of provide not just traditional facilities but new technology against a backdrop of Library closures. It seems necessary to keep a network of libraries, but perhaps to explore ways in which library facilities could be made available to community areas which have a poor infrastructure, perhaps on a rolling basis of a morning or afternoon once a week or even for a period once a month.

·   Broadband access is a real problem in rural areas. Perhaps a fresh approach is required. One option might explore the idea of community broadband hubs. There are opportunities to promote Community Halls (such as Orange Halls) as community hubs for improved Broadband facilities

·   In terms of the target groups it was agreed that need is the determining factor. However there is need generally so the list must be careful to be inclusive and not to exclude any group.

·   Concern was expressed that the specific PUL element contained in the previous programme was not mentioned and it was recognised that whilst much good work has been done in this area much more remains to be done. Equally a lot of good work could be undone if the programme stopped.

·   Appropriate help needs to be made available to assist with Village Plans. Some areas have done veryn well, but other areas are still experiencing deprivation and a lack of appropriate and focussed spending. The plans need to focus on specific needs and issues, rather than expecting one set of plans to provide for all.

 Frances Kerr

Treasurer,

Birches Action Rural Network

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Northern Ireland Rural Development Council

Title Mr ☐ Ms ☐ Mrs ☒ Miss ☐ Dr ☐   Please tick as appropriate

Surname

Canavan

Forename

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Cookstown
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Consultation Questions

1) Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

RDC welcomes the opportunity that the proposed programme provides to test new and innovative approaches and thinking to the very real issues of rural poverty and social isolation.

We support an outcomes based approach, particularly focusing on both achieving practical improvements in addressing rural poverty and social isolation, alongside informing and influencing wider government policy and delivery in relation to rural disadvantage, poverty, and isolation.

It will however be important to define outcomes so that they fulfil SMART criteria, clearly identifying the change which the Department seeks, and enabling the actions of the programme to be clearly linked to the achievement of these Outcomes. Examples of intended outcomes which would meet this requirement might be "to improve the range of health and wellbeing initiatives available to rural communities"; "to reduce the prevalence of social isolation and its effects among vulnerable and isolated older people in rural areas"; or "better use of rural community buildings in servicing the needs of rural dwellers". Such outcomes could be related to the type of societal change the programme is seeking to achieve or policy change linked to the programme objective of pilot testing i.e. "rural delivery models are more fully considered by local and central government".

We recognise the challenges involved in translating learning into mainstream or sustainable solutions. To achieve greater success with this aspect of the proposed Framework we suggest that the Department consider the Rural policy pathfinder approach, previously used by DEFRA, as a means of placing a greater onus on other Departments to integrate the learning from TRPSI into their service delivery, and in particular to adopt those approaches /models found to be successful.

2) **Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?**

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

Yes, the breakdown of rural poverty and social isolation in this way provides a clear framework to both identify the issues facing rural dwellers as well as providing clear guidance in the development of programmes and projects to address the issues.

Again it is important to improve the mainstreaming/adoption of successful previous and future interventions and to ensure the wider dissemination of learning from actions undertaken.

We also believe that opportunity exists to develop projects and programmes that address the 3 priority areas, such as ACE and the Rural Social Scheme (in the Republic of Ireland).

3) **Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?**

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

RDC welcome the use of the 12 Principles as proposed to guide the implementation of the Framework. We would also recommend that the Department consider widening these Principles to include transnational partnership working, project development and information exchange as a means of enhancing the value of the Programme beyond the learning and experienced gained from interventions piloted in Northern Ireland alone to include that of other rural areas of the EU.

Such an approach would also facilitate the leverage of additional funding into projects and programmes supported under the Framework and thereby providing opportunity to significantly improve both the cost effectiveness and the impact of the Programme overall.

In practical terms this may involve establishing an allocation of funding to transnational cooperation allowing potential applicants the opportunity to bid into and secure match funding for EU approved proposals.

4) Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

RDC agrees that the proposed list includes those sectors of rural society most likely to be at risk of poverty and social isolation but in particular welcomes the Department's decision to retain greater flexibility in the programme to support projects or interventions to other groups or sectors based on identified need.

It is also important that within the identified sectors, sufficient recognition is given to the targeting of those most in need or at risk, as the circumstances of every individual, regardless of gender, age, etc. is unique. For example in

recognising women, supported interventions should target and work with those women who are at risk, rather than women from rural areas in general.

RDC would suggest that this could be further revised so that proposed interventions are primarily designed to address a particular aspect of poverty or social isolation as identified in paragraphs 6.5-6.7, and whilst projects should identify the proposed target groups, they should also be able to support others for whom the identified theme is an issue.

5) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Access Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

RDC agree with the proposed priority areas for intervention but would suggest that the provision of revenue support is required under this priority area to facilitate greater complementarity with the proposed actions of the LEADER Basic Rural Services Measure. Such support would enhance the effectiveness of both programmes in facilitating improved access to key services in rural areas.

We would commend the development of the "rural hubs" approach as this will support improved access to key services through the improved utilisation of existing community infrastructure whilst also promoting the sustainability of such facilities however recognise that establishing these will require a degree of developmental support both in terms of community capacity but also and equally important the capacity of service providers to adapt to rural circumstances.

We would also highlight the valuable role that rural halls play within communities as places where people can socialise, interact and meet and believe that supporting communities to continue to maintain and manage these facilities is equally important.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

We believe that improving access to key services within rural areas requires innovation and creativity, it also requires change. In this regard we believe there is scope to design a tailored capacity building programme linked to this outcome working with communities and service providers to look at how access to key services can be improved.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Financial Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

RDC welcomes and agrees with the proposed priority areas for intervention in relation to Financial Poverty, and the indicative examples of initiatives that could be supported in response to the identified needs.

Given an identified lack of mainstream support for business development and employment growth outside of the greater Belfast area, opportunities for employment are and will remain extremely limited in rural areas, and initiatives to support employability, employment and entrepreneurship are particularly welcome.

With higher costs of living also identified as a reality of living in rural areas, particularly in respect of fuel, food, and transport costs, actions to reduce this may also offer significant benefits to rural dwellers.

RDC suggests that the Department should also consider projects or initiatives which could have cross cutting impacts e.g. supported employment programmes such as the former ACE Scheme directly impact on Financial Poverty through increased income and skills development (improved employability) whilst also having the potential to address Access Poverty (through the services provided by those on the Scheme e.g. home maintenance or home help schemes) and Social Isolation (by having the potential to improve social engagement between the programme participant and beneficiary)

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

The priority areas and indicative actions listed in the consultation document will be able to facilitate a wide range of differing interventions to meet these needs.

Our experience in delivering RYE (TRPSI funded rural youth entrepreneurship programme) indicates that support programmes that are designed and delivered on a regional basis, but which are delivered at a local level in partnership with local organisations can achieve considerable success.

We do recognise a gap in project support for rural enterprise and whilst we acknowledge the valuable contribution LEADER will play in this regard, we believe there is scope for a small grants programme to support rural enterprise below the LEADER funding thresholds.

7) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

RDC welcomes and agrees with the proposed priority areas and indicative actions for Social Inclusion. In particular RDC welcomes the inclusion of supporting community capacity and rural hubs as these have significant potential to impact on the other areas of improving social inclusion, mental and physical health and well-being.

The effectiveness of the Framework in addressing this priority area will depend on the capacity and engagement of local community organisations and may be best supported through the development of a structured programme of focused capacity building support, linked to the intended outcomes of the Framework (as suggested above in relation to access to key services).

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

Actions to improve the availability and co-ordination of transport to facilitate access to social inclusion, health and well-being activities, or the development of outreach and home based solutions where appropriate for the house bound e.g. "Good Morning" telephone contact schemes, befriending schemes, rural radio transmission services.

Actions to support the sustainability and upgrading of existing community halls, particularly in the most isolated rural areas to support the delivery of local social inclusion opportunities.

A co-ordinated and structured programme of capacity building actions could help underpin all other interventions by developing the capability of the

volunteers on which the outcomes of the Framework will depend. Such a programme could include, for example training, mentoring and technical support in areas such as volunteer recruitment and retention, succession planning, the sustainable management of community facilities, adopting a social enterprise approach to service delivery, and in project planning and development. Such a developmental support programme could be delivered through a combination of dedicated staff time in combination with a development grant to cover items such as external training. Adopting a consistent and programmatic approach would facilitate the delivery of a programme which is directly linked to the intended outcomes of the Framework, particularly by also providing opportunities to bring participants together at regional events, or by developing best practice guidance publications which would then be available to any rural community organisation.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

Please provide comments in the box below

> The successor TRPSI Framework could contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures by facilitating the coordination and delivery of:-
>
> - A rural research evidence base
> - A structured development support and capacity building programme for rural community organisations and service providers based around project and group development, sustainability, facilities and services management, linked to TRPSI intended outcomes and in supporting the sector to access opportunities under RDP and other EU programmes
> - A programme of events and sharing practice to support the rural community sector become actively engaged in the achievement of the wider TRPSI objectives

9) How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?

Please provide comments in the box below

Community Planning is essentially about developing a more integrated and collaborative approach to the delivery of public services in response to local needs and circumstance. The Community Planning processes across the new councils have included considerable public engagement in order to identify the specific needs of each area. Significant opportunity exists for the TRPSI Framework to support the delivery of local Community Plans by facilitating the match funding of identified actions as they apply to rural areas, and where the Community Plan supports the need for the intervention.

Sharing information between the 2 structures could also help in the provision of Key Local advice and it may also be useful to share the benefits of previous investment through a mapping exercise of previous projects, which can help in the identification of local needs.

10) **Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:**

(xiii)   The Equality and Human Rights Template
Please provide comments in the box below

The conclusions reached by DARD in respect of the Equality and Human Rights Template appear reasonable given the purpose and focus of the proposed Framework.

(xiv)   The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

The conclusions reached by DARD in respect of the Rural Issues Statement appear reasonable given the purpose and focus of the proposed Framework.

We would however recommend that the development of a research programme is considered within the Framework in order to develop a strong rural evidence base both to inform actions funded under the Framework and also its wider policy development and influencing role. This would also assist in the effective targeting of TRPSI resources and in the more accurate monitoring and evaluation of the Framework against the Intended Outcomes.

Such research could also be used to help inform future programme development in addressing issues such as the definition of rural, providing further detail and evidence on the specific features and impacts of poverty and social isolation in a rural context, and considering ways of quantifying this, such as the preparation of suitable alternative measures of deprivation.

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

RDC welcomes the DARD proposal for a successor to the Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation Framework 2011-15, and the Aims, Objectives and Intended Outcomes in general.

We suggest, however, that the structure of the programme is more aligned to the Intended Outcomes, and that these Outcomes are reviewed to ensure that they are more specific and can therefore be monitored. This should facilitate that all supported actions can be clearly monitored for their impact in moving towards the achievement of these Outcomes.

In addition, we recommend that a greater focus is provided towards the dissemination of the learning achieved through the programme and in supporting the mainstreaming, transfer or sustainability of successful interventions.

Our experience with the RYE project has also illustrated the potential of TRPSI to act as a local match funder to transnational projects funded through European programmes such as the Northern periphery and Arctic Programme, or Erasmus+ and therefore expand the impact of its funding by drawing on international experiences and expertise, as well as funding in addressing the issues of rural poverty and social isolation, which are shared across much of rural Europe.

As has been identified, the engagement of local community and voluntary sector is key to the success of the Framework. The capacity and sustainability of the sector is therefore a crucial component to the delivery of the change that the Framework seeks. RDC suggests that a dedicated and tailored capacity building programme should be a core building block of the new Framework.

Delivering a dedicated and structured suite of capacity building actions has the potential to add significant value to the effectiveness of the Framework as a whole, by improving both the quality of community led proposals, and the capability of the sector to deliver. In addition, it should improve the longer term sustainability of these organisations both in terms of resource management and in volunteer recruitment and retention, thereby supporting the infrastructure of the sector beyond the lifetime of the proposed Framework.

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Please Note this form **must** be returned with your response to ensure that we handle your response appropriately.

1. Name / Organisation

Organisation Name (If applicable).

Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network (CWSAN) - (Local Rural Support Network)

Title Mr ✓ Ms ☐ Mrs ☐ Miss ☐ Dr ☐   Please tick as appropriate

Surname

Corr

Forename

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Consultation Questions

1) Do you agree that the proposed Aim, Objectives and Intended Outcomes (see Section 6) for the TRPSI Framework are appropriate?

✓   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures in hundreds of rural villages and communities to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. Although not clearly highlighted in some of the TRPSI consultation papers, it has been acknowledged by all stakeholders (from The Minister and the ARD Committee to local groups) that all the other TRPSI measures in the current programme were dependent on a solid and responsive rural community infrastructure across NI. The LRSNs have worked closely with DARD for over 20 years to put that infrastructure in place and that is the reason so many of the TRPSI measures have been so successful.

For example, in recent months the Rural Capital Micro Grant Programme has been promoted for DARD by the LRSNs and 2 phases have been rolled out to small rural groups in every part of rural NI. The programme has been oversubscribed and highly effective in targeting small grants at the most needy groups, helping them to deliver a wide range of local rural services. The MARA programme, Farm Families Health Checks and the promotion of Library services have all exceeded their targets thanks in large part to the promotional and organisational abilities and reach of the LRSNs. A local presence and knowledge of the area is to key to successful delivery.

This experience linked to the hundreds of rural groups and thousands of individuals associated with the LRSNs means that the Networks can help DARD to meet the objectives set in section 6 "Proposals for a successor Framework post 2016". Together with other rural stakeholders, we can "promote the development of new and innovative pilot approaches to TRPSI AND encourage effective partnership working AND effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas".

2) **Do you agree that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation (see Section 6) – should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework?**

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide any supporting comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks believe that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework as they are still relevant in 2016, encapsulate the varying needs of the rural community and encompass a service deliverability which can be most effectively demonstrated through a local or sub regional level approach.

The identification and successful delivery of various projects and programmes within these priorities would continue to bring greatest positive impact to the needs of those experiencing rural poverty and isolation. The priorities allow for a bottom-up community development approach in not only identifying relevant needs but also in delivering upon them using a cascade approach. It is our view that the most effective TRPSI programmes delivered to date have had a strong community ethos and process coupled with local knowledge access to where rural, social and economic needs are most prevalent. Invariably, there will be different levels of need in different geographical areas, however, as the nature of community sector delivery is designed sub regionally and is based on pertinent local needs then those most in poverty or experiencing isolation have less probability in remaining outside the reach of these priorities and programmes.

The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation framework and it's priorities to date has been an excellent package of funding aimed at supporting vulnerable people and targeting the root causes of social isolation. As programmes take effect and outputs deliver meaningful change there are indeed necessary modifications within the themes or priorities which are required to continue to make most impact on the frameworks aims whilst external factors such as austerity and public budget finance availability will also determine and prioritize future considerations.

It is our view that the 3 Priority Areas – Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation should continue to be the main priorities for the TRPSI Framework since programmes can emerge from these themes which meet best the local community needs.

TRPSI and the priorities has now gained substantial traction and is now recognised as an essential brand which has made a huge difference to rural communities and which is complementary to the NIRDP. Many of the issues these priorities have tackled to date were previously hidden and would fall outside the remit of other mainstream funding programmes. There remains, however, continued challenges, needs and rural TRPSI issues which require on-going support at various levels of intervention and which would still come under these 3 priorities.

The Rural Community Development Support Service currently delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks, as a model of support to TRPSI, is most certainly envied throughout communities in Europe as a model leader in balancing appropriate and measured interventions to social, economic and access poverty issues at a community level. Promoting Community development at a local/sub regional ensures that Regional programmes are delivered effectively at the local level and access to the real needs and issues of communities is provided for. Supporting access to good governance, to economic and social poverty in communities; the service as provided by these local community based networks has proved an invaluable resource to the delivery of the TRPSI framework.

These experienced local stakeholders have good working relationships with all other TRPSI delivery agents and indeed share a direct role in elements of their success making essential and valuable linkages and connections at sub regional and local levels. The key management role of DARD in direct delivery of this programme has

proved to be most effective in ensuring that the networks could assist DARD to manage Regional programmes at local levels and to balance approaches necessary to ensuring programme priority themes reached the community sector using bottom up approaches.

The local access support provided to DARDs Modernisation programme and its Rural Micro Capital Grants programmes, as and when required by DARD, evidence how this infrastructure can react and respond to changing rural needs and requirements. Their modus operandi for the delivery of programmes such as MARA are a testament to the Community Development approach which ensures participation and access to hidden and real needs at a local level across all 3 main priorities.

The networking function plays an invaluable role in achieving key community participation at all necessary levels from village planning facilitation to rural proofing consultation. With the reform of local Government, Community Planning, and the mandatory Charities registration requirements; these networks provide local mentoring support and guidance, technical support and facilitation at grassroots level to those rural communities most in need under the programme priorities of Access Poverty, Financial Poverty and Social Isolation. Most importantly, they can identify what local pertinent needs fit the programme.

We believe that it the approaches taken under the overlying programme priorities which provide the appropriate lynchpins to ensure leverage of many other programmes and projects into rural areas and which have included such as community mental health awareness, capital build infrastructural programmes, rural tourism, lifelong learning, social investment, migrant support etc. These programmes operate in a time of decentralisation and digitization of services, the closing of rural banks, post offices, schools and other services and thus during a time when the greatest need for local people to provide adequate solutions to their own issues and problems within a community development approach. The 3 themes adequately allow for local communities, sub regional and innovative approach making to meeting rural TRPI needs.

3) Do you agree that the 12 Key Principles (see Section 6) are appropriate for the TRPSI Framework?

☒ **Yes**

☐ **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The rural support organisations delivering the DARD Rural Support programme agree with the key TRPSI principles as outlined in the framework document. Historically Local Rural Support Networks successfully delivered pilot, innovative projects and interventions collaboratively and in partnership with statutory and other community and voluntary organisations and are widely perceived as the link between grass roots community groups operating at a local level with regional statutory bodies.

Positive outcomes of a collaborative approach to the delivery of services aimed at addressing rural poverty and isolation issues include:
- Ensures the socially isolated and those with financial related issues have access and opportunities to avail of support services
- Increases the capacity of designated rural support organisations and grass roots community groups to collectively and with greater efficiency deliver both services and support interventions that may not be possible if delivered in isolation.

A negative outcome of delivering a successful pilot or innovative project is the lack of funding to effectively mainstream the service or project. Increased opportunities to continue or mainstream projects that have demonstrated effectiveness should be a

key objective of a future TRPSI framework both for addressing poverty and social isolation issues and having to avoid dealing with the expectation when a service or project ceases.

Local Rural Support Networks will continue to be a conduit to disseminate information on key government strategies to the community voluntary sector through their established communication channels and will continue to lobby and be the 'voice' of the rural community sector during discussions with statutory and governmental organisations e.g. Rural Development Programme and Community Planning.

4) **Do you agree that the list of Target Groups (see Section 6) is appropriate in relation to providing support to vulnerable groups under the successor TRPSI Framework?**

☒   **Yes**

☐   **No**

Please provide supporting comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) welcome the proposal that the successor Framework would be open to a wider range of target groups. As an infrastructure providing community development support to the rural community across Northern Ireland for many years, we have, almost without exception, worked with all these vulnerable groups.

We particularly welcome the introduction of the working poor and the under employed. The continuing economic uncertainty has left many families in difficult financial circumstances. One or both parents are working however income levels fall below what they need to have a meaningful quality of life. A sudden change in circumstances, such as marital breakup or ill health, can have further detrimental consequences and lead to social exclusion and poverty.

Mental health still retains a significant stigma, particularly in rural areas, and many of the LRSN's run programmes which directly tackle mental ill health in their communities. Statistics show that one in four run the risk of mental ill health thus their inclusion in this framework is essential.

The inclusion of the LGBT community in the framework is also welcome. Whilst members of the LGBT community live in rural areas they tend to meet and socialise in their nearest town. However LRSN's have a role to play in supporting them to remain in their community and in ensuring statutory organisations and the wider public are aware of the issues affecting them.

Perhaps one omission from the list of vulnerable groups is men. Whilst accepted that most farmers are men there may be male rural dwellers who are not farmers. Globally, the gap between male and female life expectancy and healthy life expectancy has widened in the last 40 years and is expected to get even bigger by 2030. Research commissioned by the Priory Group of 1,000 men found that: 77% of men polled have suffered with anxiety / stress / depression; the biggest pressures in men's life are work (32%), finance (31%) and health (23%); the majority of men claim their mental health is having a negative impact on their work performance, parenting ability and relationships; 40% of men polled said it would take thoughts of suicide or self-harm to compel them to seek professional help.
(www.priorygroup.com/blog/mentalhealth/-i-ve-learnt-to-deal-with-it---40-of-men-won-t-talk-to-anyone-about-their-mentalhealth)

5)   (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Access Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

We are pleased to welcome the measures in the draft Framework. Many of the proposed measures will go a long way to tackle issues that blight so many rural dwellers. We appreciate that the list of groups is not exhausted. Women, Farmers, People on work on low incomes (the working poor), children and young people, older people and Ethnic Minorities and immigrants, People with low skills or low levels of education et al. Our experience shows that some of the groups need to be broken down into subgroups.

For example there are sections of the farming industry that have seen their incomes severely cut in the last two years (dairy Farmers). Future prices in this industry predict another 10% drop in the next three months. Mental health in this area gives us great cause for concern. This is evidenced by the increase calls to help lines, up by 30% in the last year.

Many Ethnic Minorities are finding it difficult to assimilate, especially those living in the rural community. There are a number of factors that drive this. Some Ethnic groups neither have English as their first or second language; this communication barrier reinforces isolation and is a contributing factor in poor mental health. Those who have a strong grasp of the English language find it easier to "fit in". This also is a factor in this section being "excepted". In conclusion we think this group of Ethnic minorities should be broken down into sections not exclusively into language sections. I.e. short to medium dwellers who may seasonal workers.

We are pleased with the other target groups and we welcome that people with low skills and low levels of education might have a chance to enhance their employability. The training involved to up skill this group will act as a medium to tackle social isolation. Many who suffer from social isolation either don't recognise their plight or only recognise it when their horizons broaden due to intervention from an un-proscribed source. I.e. further education either social education or accredited.

The "Outcomes based pilot programmes" is also most welcome. This allows delivery agents latitude to make informed researched based decisions that will go to the hart rural poverty and social isolation.

Under 6.8 V we strongly concur with the mainstreaming of successful pilot projects. The Department launch the Rural Community Micro Grants 2015-2016. We in the Rural Support Networks found this reached parts of the rural community that that had

gone under the radar in the past. This has opened a pathway for community development that goes to the core of TRPSI policy. This merges into 6VII "sustainability". Some groups for the first time now see a pathway using community a development approach with the support of the Networks. 6.8 X The sharing of information and best practice learning between organisations has the potential that prevents groups trying to "reinventing the wheel" and will avoid duplication between organisations.

6.8 XI The community planning and the consultation process will be key, both in a strategic and a complementary role. It is imperative that at all stages of the community planning that the rural voice is heard and well represented. The Networks will play an enabling role to ensure events are well attended and the TRPSI policy principles are promoted.

6.8 VIII Good Relations being promoted. There will be many opportunities to develop innovative partnerships, PEACEIV et al. One should not underestimate the incidental "good relations" through the Rural Development programme. The carrot and stick approach for single identity group has been proven to open halls to a wider diaspora. Not only does this lead to better community relations but adds to the sustainability of the halls.

(b) Please provide details on any further measures which you think should be considered to help address _Access Poverty_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Rural Community Micro Grants opened many new doors because it gave an incentive for tangible assets to be acquired for the benefit of a particular group. For many this has been the first time in making a funding application. The benefits not only include the asset but their governance has now been under the spotlight and sharpened to enable their participation. We would propose an extenuation of this innovative idea. The structure used to deliver the grants is now well established, this same structure could deliver small capitol grants say up to £10,000 for basic needs that so many halls throughout the country need.

Community transport should be reviewed to widen its scope. Longer journeys should be considered that travel between a number of service providers.

Evidence indicates that there is an appetite for computer training in rural areas. The LRSNs could deliver this service. There used to be an outreach service from the regional Colleges, we don't advocate for its return. The service that they provided no longer is fit for propose. Farmers and rural dwellers want a basic standard of training that may not necessarily be accredited. The end result would be Farmers having the ability to make online returns. Farm families coming together braking social isolation and have a greater understanding of the world wide web.

Greater use and the promotion of Luncheon Clubs in rural areas could provide a service that; tackles social isolation, helps sustain a target audience, increases the sustainability of rural halls. All this combined adds to the cohesion of rural communities.

6) (a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

Financial poverty refers to the measure of the degree to which people face the risk of serious deprivation in terms of their standard of living or to which they fall below a specified minimum level of resources. Through the measures in the draft action plan there is the opportunity to raise the standard of living for those people living in rural areas. Particularly in regard to addressing issues such as rural transport which is currently a major issue which prohibits many rural dwellers from accessing essential basic services. In addition measures targeted at supporting household energy efficiency improvement & the introduction of new employability and entrepreneurship opportunities are also to be welcomed.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address *Financial Poverty* among vulnerable people in rural areas

Other measures which may alleviate financial poverty among vulnerable people in rural areas include the creation of jobs through investment in infrastructure such as investment in rural hubs, renovating abandoned housing and broadband infrastructure development, therefore increasing the chances of the young people of rural areas to stay, therefore building a stronger rural economy. With added investment in high quality and affordable childcare and early intervention this will create increased opportunities for jobs.

7) **(a) Please comment on how effective you think the measures contained in the draft Action Plan (see Section 7) will be in addressing _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas**

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the continued recognition by DARD of the problems caused within the rural population due to Social Isolation. We acknowledge the priority areas for intervention listed within the Draft Action Plan under Social Isolation of promoting tolerance, health, well-being and inclusion for rural dwellers and through our long established work within rural communities agree that these are valid and worthwhile Priority Areas for Intervention.

Poor Mental Health and well-being is an issue that has major impacts within rural communities given the fact that many people are living in isolated circumstances often on their own or with limited family and / or community connections.
The farming community is also a grouping who have been demonstrated to have poor mental health as they are facing increasing stresses of managing their businesses mostly working on an individual basis with limited opportunities to engage with others. Many of the LRSN's are engaged in delivering mental health and wellbeing programmes over the last ten years, all of these programmes have been externally evaluated and have shown excellent results in improving local mental health and wellbeing. Any new pilot programmes delivered under the new framework need to take into consideration the knowledge and learning of the evaluations.

One concern that the LRSN's would have that by naming the priority as _'promote positive mental health and wellbeing'_ rather than '_promoting positive health and wellbeing';_ interventions could be limited in their scope to secure engagement by rural dwellers. There is still a stigma around mental health in rural areas and people would be more likely to engage with activities that are seen to be about general health and wellbeing, people in many instances would not want to be identified through participating in activities as someone who has mental health issue. If people are at least attracted to an activity the issue of mental health can then be addressed.

Therefore as LRSN's we do welcome the example initiatives listed as they list 'Support for health and wellbeing activities' as well as 'Support the promotion of mental health awareness and actions' and we ask that the learning and evidence from positive work that has been undertaken with rural communities through the

LRSN's, Healthy Living Centres, other Community, Voluntary and Statutory bodies on these actions and activities are used when drawing up plans for initiatives to support under the new TRPSI framework.

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome actions that will support the rural population to improve their health and wellbeing particularly those activities that are operated and provided at local facilities and venues.

The LRSN's welcome that *'increase opportunities for social engagement'* is listed as a priority area of intervention as the value of people of all ages within rural communities being given the opportunity to engage with others on a social basis cannot be underestimated. It is through these social activities that the aim of "promote tolerance, health, wellbeing and inclusion' can be best achieved within rural communities as by bringing people together they are getting to know each other. This is needed within communities as in many instances during their working and education lives many members of rural communities are away from the community during the day and thus have limited opportunities to engage with others. It is only though actual engagement in the same physical space that tolerance can be promoted and this is especially important in rural communities as due to low numbers of people activities are best organised to attract as many members of the population as possible so that a sufficient number of people attend to make an activity viable. Therefore anything that can be done to encourage use of community facilities that have been traditionally associated as belonging to one section of the community would be welcome. Such venues can become hubs for social inclusion activities within rural communities.

Many venues within rural communities require some level of work to ensure that they are brought up to a condition that they are accessible and suitable to be used to provide activities that address social isolation.

The Local Rural Support Networks welcome the inclusion of *'support community capacity'* as an example initiative as a capable and effective local community infrastructure is of vital importance to the fabric of life within rural communities and those involved in organisations within local communities are largely undertaking this role on a voluntary basis. These organisations require ongoing community development support to continue their operations on an effective and efficient basis

and become involved in projects that will address poverty and social isolation at a local level within rural communities.

The community development support work delivered by the Local Rural Support Networks resourced under the previous TRPSI Framework has been very effective in ensuring the survival and continued operation of local community infrastructure. This community infrastructure of the LRSN's working in partnership with organisations located within local communities has also ensured that many of the other initiatives supported under TRPSI have been effective at reaching into rural communities and tackling poverty and social isolation.

(b) Please provide details on any other measures which you think should be considered to help address _Social Isolation_ among vulnerable people in rural areas

The Local Rural Support Networks would welcome the resourcing of actions to plan and coordinate the effective operation of activities that would address social isolation. This would involve a resource of a person to co-ordinate activities and associated resource budget to cover some of the costs of operating activities particularly training new and innovative activities on a pilot basis. This would ensure that activities are operated on a coordinated and effective basis, securing sufficient numbers, building linkages within and between communities, duplication is avoided, gaps in provision of social inclusion activities are identified and tackled.

The ongoing work within the LRSN's and their delivery of the MARA project has clearly demonstrated that there is a significant issue around mental health problems in homes, particularly depression and loneliness. The framework would provide an excellent opportunity to design a pilot project that would take advantage of the excellent community development model that we have that could be harnessed to deliver a programme to enable rural dwellers to avail of resources to assist them to overcome loneliness and seek help with other mental health conditions. The programme could be designed to ensure a rural community response is adopted to encourage self-help and self-care.

8) How might the successor TRPSI Framework contribute towards the development of more effective rural community support structures?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor for rural organisations (e.g. the 9 Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs) / Rural Community Development Support Service Contract) in terms ensuring rural proofing, levering-in vital resources to rural areas, and enabling effective implementation of the TRPSI Framework throughout the region.

Making Strategic Facilitation a reality: the TRPSI Framework is vital to ensuring that rural needs are addressed by the government in a localised and joined-up way that reaches the most vulnerable and those most in need.

The successor TRPSI Framework would not only enable much greater utilisation of financial resources, but also would combine the expertise of public sector bodies, and the private, voluntary and community sectors to create greater economies of scale in terms utilising all available knowledge, skills and capacity. This in turn maximises innovation and enables increased access to those most in need and those who are most difficult to reach (e.g. the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households).

TRPSI has been vital in ensuring that *rural* gets its fair share in terms of community development via a high quality networking infrastructure and Community Development Support Service that is run by grass roots representatives right across the region.

The DARD Rural Micro-Capital Grants Programme delivered on-the-ground by the 9 Local Rural Support Networks, have been essential to ensuring capital investment reaches the smallest and lowest capacity rural groups throughout the entire region.

The additional financial leverage over the last four years from the Local Rural Support Networks alone in terms of additional programmes, projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability, capacity etc) is £56 million.

The LRSNs have been central to the role of assisting the set-up of the new local Action Groups (NIRDP) and ensuring grass roots community representation.

9) How might a successor TRPSI Framework support the delivery of local councils Community Plans?

Please provide comments in the box below

The TRPSI Framework could play a key role in the delivery of local Council Community Plans via the TRPSI funded Rural Community Development Support Service which can facilitate the ongoing involvement of the Local Rural Support Networks (LRSN's) in the community planning process. The foundations for the delivery of Community Planning already exist within the local Council areas through the LRSN's and their vast network of community based organisations – Community Planning should build upon these existing structures. The delivery of Community Planning within the local Council areas will require the engagement of existing and emerging partnerships working collaboratively. The well-established and proven track record of the LRSN's could well be effective resources in such a delivery process. It is imperative that the development of Community Planning includes the continuing engagement of such current resources so as agreed delivery structures for Community Planning are adopted that act as wider collaborative forums for the benefit of the communities that they will ultimately serve.

During the past 4 years the LRSN's have delivered, under the current TRPSI Framework, a Rural Community Development Support Service to a wide range of rural organisation & groups. This has proven to be an effective model and partnership for the delivery of such services and the LRSN's, with continued support from the TRPSI programme, are therefore well placed to assist local Councils in the delivery of community planning over the next number of years due to the following factors:
• Strong partnership & links with the rural community already in place
• Added value from funding leverage from other programmes
• Already working closely with DARD to deliver services including the development of the NI Rural Development Programme (2014-2020)

The delivery structures for the Community Planning process within local Councils must therefore take account of existing rural structures & delivery organisations so as to ensure there is less fragmentation of implementation groups and integration of the various locally focused Action Plans. This will ensure that the Community Planning process will effectively serve the priority needs of the rural community, the ongoing support of DARD for the rural community development sector at grass roots level through the TRPSI framework is crucial to this.

10) Do you have any views on the conclusions reached by DARD (see Section 9) in relation to the proposals for a successor TRPSI Framework in respect of:

(xv)   The Equality and Human Rights Template

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to contribute, develop and implement new and innovative pilot measures to Target Rural Poverty and reduce Social Isolation. The LRSNs welcome a localised approach to the design and delivery of measures which effectively target financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation among vulnerable people in rural areas in line with the key principles of the Framework. The LRSNs are advantageously neutral to central and local government ensuring that all rural communities can access resources, services and programmes in a timely manner regardless of religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation or disability. The LRSNs ensure Section 75 information is recorded in line with procedures under International Quality Standard ISO 9001:2008 and kept securely in keeping with Data Protection Legislation.

(xvi)   The Rural Issues Statement

Please provide comments in the box below

The Local Rural Support Networks (LRSNs)/Rural Community Development Support Service contract holders have a proven track record of working with DARD (as partner organisations) to ensure the TRPSI Framework has been a key success factor ensuring rural proofing and enabling effective implementation positive direct impact on the vulnerable in rural communities through a localised infrastructure. In the last four years we have empowered some 15,000 individuals, including the hardest to reach, socially isolated and most vulnerable of the population in Northern Ireland. Delivering capacity building programmes within rural areas to encourage and ensure participation in the Rural Development Programme. Undertaking the delivery of the MARA Project has reached out to almost 15,000 households directly impacting on their quality of life. The LRSNs have also been successful in additional leverage which has had positive indirect impacts. For example we have rolled out projects and grant schemes (promoting health, peace, equality, skills, employability) equating to over £56million in the last four years. All of these measures support the delivery of key services for rural dwellers to avail of and have indirectly helped to tackle social isolation and the related mental health connotations that come with this. The central and neutral role that the LRSNs deliver; give local services for local people and ensure grass roots community representation in rolling out TRPSI Framework.

11) Is there any other aspect of the proposals that you wish to comment on?

Please provide comments in the box below

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FROM: JONATHAN BELL MLA

DATE: *21* JANUARY 2016

TO: MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA
            DARD MINISTER

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR A SUCCESSOR TO DARD'S
TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION FRAMEWORK
(SUB/1355/2015)

You sought comments from all Ministers on the above.

2.   I agree with the sentiments expressed on access to quality broadband for rural communities and DETI will continue to work with government colleagues and industry partners on improving our telecoms infrastructure.

3.   The planned extension of the natural gas network to main towns in the West of Northern Ireland and East Down will provide additional fuel choices for business and domestic consumers and help with budgeting of energy costs through the option of gas pre-payment meters for domestic consumers.

4.   Finally, the responsibility for the delivery of social entrepreneurship was transferred to Councils on 1 April 2015. Invest NI will have the final evaluation report of Social Entrepreneurship Programme, in the near future, which they will be happy to share with any other interested departments.

JONATHAN BELL MLA
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment