

Draft Rural White Paper Action Plan – Response Form

Note that responses to the consultation should arrive with DARD not later than close of play on Monday 13th June 2011

1. The consultation document sets out a *vision* for rural areas and associated key *policy priorities*.

a. Do you think the *vision* for rural areas reflects how you would wish to see the future of rural area? Please comment as appropriate.

Whilst Belfast City Council predominately covers an urban area, it also includes some rural areas such as the Belfast Hills and facilities in outlying areas such as Roselawn Cemetery, Beechvale Farm and the City of Belfast Playing Fields, and although we operate in an urban environment the importance of the rural fringe cannot be underestimated in terms of tourist potential and providing recreational facilities for the citizens of the city. In principle we support the vision for rural areas that is laid out in the paper although we feel that it is aspirational and needs detail around how it will be achieved.

b. Do you think there are other *policy priorities* which should be included? If so, please specify which and explain why.

We feel that the policy priorities listed are comprehensive and there are no others that we would add.

c. Do you think any of the *policy priorities* should be omitted? If so, please specify which and explain why.

We believe that all the policy priorities included are important and we do not believe that any of them should be omitted.

2. The draft Rural White Paper Action Plan sets out the actions to which Departments have committed. Please consider how realistic and meaningful the proposed actions are and comment on how effective you think they will be in contributing to:

a. The development of more sustainable *rural economies*

Belfast City Council agrees in principle with all the actions that are set out in the document. However we believe that the actions are high level and that more detail is required to allow us to determine their impact and their effectiveness in contributing to the development of more sustainable *rural economies*.

b. The development of more sustainable *rural communities*

Belfast City Council agrees in principle with all the actions that are set out in the document. However we believe that the actions are high level and that more detail is required to allow us to determine their impact and their effectiveness in contributing to the development of more sustainable *rural communities*.

c. The development of a more sustainable *rural environment*

Belfast City Council agrees in principle with all the actions that are set out in the document. However we believe that the actions are high level and that more detail is required to allow us to determine their impact and their effectiveness in contributing to the development of a more sustainable *rural environment*.

3. Please consider what you think are the *key challenges or priorities* for rural areas over the next five years?

a. Please give details of what you consider to be the *key challenges/priorities* for rural areas and provide reasons why.

As a predominately urban area Belfast City Council do not believe that it is appropriate that we detail what we consider to be the key challenges/priorities for rural areas across Northern Ireland. For those areas that are rural within the Belfast City Council area we consider the key challenges/priorities to be the protection and prompting of our natural heritage and the protection of biodiversity and our meeting of targets under EU directives around this.

b. Please comment on the extent to which you think the proposed actions set out in the Rural White Paper Action Plan will help address these *key challenges/priorities*?

Due to the lack of detail around the proposed actions we do not feel that we are in a position to comment on the extent to which the proposed actions will help address these key challenges/priorities.

4. What further measures do you think should be included in the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan to help address these *key challenges/priorities*?

While we welcome actions that will reduce bureaucracy we are concerned that the actions do not take account of the new EU targets around biodiversity that have to be in place by 2020 or the 2050 vision. We feel that measures need to be put in place to ensure that we do not fail to meet targets under EU directives resulting in heavy fines or other measures.

5. Do you think that the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan needs to focus more on particular issues? If so, please indicate which issues you think it should focus more on and give reasons for your views.

The particular issues that we think the **draft Rural White Paper Action Plan needs to focus more on** are an increase in rural tourism opportunities and increased sustainable recreational use of the countryside. We have the following views around actions 82 and 83.

The only piece of legislation in Northern Ireland that relates to access to the countryside is the Access to the Countryside (NI) order 1983. Under this order the Council have a duty to assert rights of ways and this is currently carried out through the countryside officer. However, whilst the legislation imposes a duty on Councils to assert, protect, keep open and free from obstruction rights of way, it doesn't actually empower the Council to enter another person's land to do this. We would also suggest that the legislation may need to be revisited with a view to making it more user friendly for the landowners and look at issues such as removing liability from them to encourage them to promote access.

Whilst we encourage access to the countryside this need to be balanced against the protection of sites which have sensitive habitats or are designated for their nature conservation or historical interest. In some instances access to certain sites may not be feasible or desirable or only low levels of access may be appropriate. We would also suggest that management systems be put in place to combat the dangers of spreading invasive species through public use and ensure that usage is sustainable and monitored.

We would also suggest that inland waterways are considered as a key element in the development of rural tourism. Canals and water recreation can play a key role in the development of tourism especially boating, walking, jogging and cycling. Canals can also provide economic hubs in rural situations - note the success of Lock 3 café and similar examples can be found in the Republic of Ireland along the Shannon Erne Waterway. Many of the small towns along this course have benefited economically from tourism.

Finally we would recommend that DCAL are also involved in the delivery of these actions.

6. What do you think are the main strengths of the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan?

Belfast City Council thinks that the main strengths of the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan are that it is aspirational, takes a thematic approach and is cross departmental.

7. What do you think are the main weaknesses of the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan?

Belfast City Council thinks that the main weakness of the draft Rural White Action Plan is its lack of detail around the proposed actions and how they will be delivered to achieve the vision.

8. How should the success of the Rural White Paper Action Plan be measured?

We believe that in its current format it would be difficult to measure the success of the Rural White Paper Action Plan and that the proposed actions need to be more detailed and include measurable targets.

Name Andrew Hassard

Organisation Belfast City Council

Address Parks and Leisure Department

3rd Floor, Adelaide Exchange

24-26 Adelaide Street

Belfast

Postcode BT2 8DG

Signature 9 June 2011

Date 9 June 2011

If completing an electronic version of the form, it should be saved in *MS Word* format and emailed to: laura.scott@dardni.gov.uk

Alternatively you can post or **FAX** a copy of the completed response form to:

Laura Scott

Rural Policy Division

Room 404, Dundonald House

Upper Newtownards Road

Belfast, BT4 3SB

FAX: 02890 524148



Department of
**Agriculture and
Rural Development**
www.dardni.gov.uk

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