



**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To**

Consultation on adopting online as the
primary channel of communicating and
transacting between DARD and
customers

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
(DARDNI)

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NIRWN

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1 Introduction

1.1 NIRWN's vision is a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

NIRWN key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme, funded by DSD and DARD to give a voice to rural women

Mission

NIRWN's mission, as a rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

1.2 NIRWN, as a member of the Women's Regional Consortium funded through DSD, welcome the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on Proposals adopting online as the primary channel of communicating and transacting between DARD and customers

1.3 This response is informed by our membership's views on online communication and Broadband through our research and stakeholder engagement.

2 Comments:

2.1 GENERAL

NIRWN and our members feel that DARD currently makes a real effort to treat people according to their needs with the information they have. The development of new systems however offers a very real opportunity to consider how women in farm families could be more effectively considered in future policy development and delivery with more effective data capture. This aligns with the Department's assertion that doing more of your work online 'provides opportunity for: storing and using more accurate information. It was noted that it is difficult to accurately gauge the potential adverse gender impacts which may occur as a result of the implementation of the measures; as the statistics available are not broken down in a wider context, for example, in respect of families and women. The absence of a baseline makes it very difficult to monitor and comment on.

A key issue for rural farming women is that of not being formally recognised. The current Agricultural Census reporting system only allows for one principal partner. This meant that, in the last census, 35 per cent of women who were working more than 30 hours a week on their farms were classified only as 'farmer's spouses'¹.

The lack of gender awareness and the absence of gender-disaggregated information have been identified as the main problems in recognising farming women's contribution to the agricultural sector. Shortall² correctly highlighted that, in Western Europe most farms are operated by farm families. If the work and role of women on farms is not measured and recognised; it is impossible to assess the impact positively, or negatively, of measures such as adopting online as a primary method of communicating.

2.2 Groups that may be Impacted: Men and Women Generally

NIRWN welcomes the Department's thorough screening and clear demonstration that they

¹ Shortall, S and R Kelly (2001) **Gender Proofing CAP Reforms** Rural Community Network

² Shortall, S (2002) **Women in the Field: Women, Farming and Organizations-** [Gender, Work & Organization Volume 8 Issue 2](#), Pages 164 – 181, 2010 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

take seriously their S75 statutory duty. We express our concern that there is little evidence in this screening or the rural proofing paper that the Department has considered the particular impacts these proposals will have on rural women.

As set out in OFMDFM Gender equality strategy it is not sufficient to simply consider men and women generally; *The 'Gender Equality Strategy' for Northern Ireland*³ recognises that: *'treating men and women the same – that is being 'gender neutral' - is not the solution to eradicating gender inequality' (p.15) and later: 'treating men and women the same will not ensure equal outcomes because of the different experiences of women and men and the different economic and social positions occupied by them'.*

Our members have expressed to us that it is more often than not women in farm families who shoulder the administrative duties associated with farm ownership, irrespective of who holds the farm ID number. It follows then that women are very likely to experience the uncertainty and the adverse impacts of the proposal to adopt online as the primary channel.

2.3 Digital Assistance

We welcome the commitment to provide digital assistance and we would like some further detail as it emerges as to what form this will take, and how the Department proposes to assess what assistance would be useful.

2.4 Potential Mitigations

Potential mitigations that our members expressed that might be useful are detailed here:

ICT Confidence and Competency

Women feel they need to have training and access to all the services available as they don't feel they have the ICT skills and confidence required to do all the online form filling etc now required.

Technical Support

It was suggested that a helpline providing technical support and assistance would be very helpful for those who have ICT skills and don't require training but face uncertainty with new style forms, formats etc.

³ OFMDFM. *A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. The Gender Equality Unit. 2006.

The women on a farm are, as earlier mentioned, often left with the administrative duties associated with farming. It was particularly evident that now some DARD initiatives are scored higher if submitted online; women definitely felt extra pressure when responding to correspondence and making online submissions; creating fear within even those who consider themselves relatively ICT competent.

A technical support helpline you could simply telephone with a query e.g. to check you have correctly interpreted a question, it was suggested, would significantly reduce or eliminate any potential adverse impact on the farmers or landowners concerned

DARD Direct Offices

The rationalisation of DARD Direct offices has, in some cases, created a travel and transportation access issue for farm families. There is also a time and revenue impact for farmers if they have to travel further and spend more time away from their farm and business.

Irrespective of the rationalisation of DARD Direct offices, all those we spoke to agreed support should be available in the DARD Direct offices to support farmers with online applications etc. perhaps with an appointments system in place.

Farm Family Training

Training for farm families would be useful in; all new changes and systems; ICT generally, application forms, bookkeeping V.A.T. etc. This training should be advertised and promoted to farm families and not just the named farmer. This is where a new database contact system as part of the new record keeping (see 2.2). It is often women and children (often grown up) not employed on the farm; who provide administrative support in their own time to facilitate the successful running of the farm. Directly targeting training and support to the Farm family and not simply the Farm ID holder would go some way towards succession planning too and the department's aim to increase the number of farmers with recognised qualifications.

Extra Financial Burden

The group felt that **local** provision of ICT/new systems training was also imperative. Suggestions were that training could be provided in local school facilities or, CAFRE facilities if closer. This would assist farm families with the burden of ICT administration and reduce the money farmers currently spend on private 'form fillers'. The online system has created extra

expense for farmers getting help with form filling and online submissions from private individuals charging for this service. This could reduce or eliminate any potential adverse impact on the farmers or landowners concerned from their lack of ICT confidence and competence.

2.5 Rural Broadband

We and our membership know that the Department is fully aware of the challenges presented by the lack of equity in Broadband quality and accessibility across the region. It will clearly take significant time before this is fully resolved. We would support the need to retain the option of paper submissions and record keeping for those who cannot conveniently communicate online. NIRWN would also ask that all new systems are as simply formatted as possible to allow them to run effectively on low bandwidth.

2.6 Staff

NIRWN do not represent DARD staff but it would be remiss of us within our remit to advocate for equality for rural women not to highlight the potential inequality to female staff as a result of these proposals. If a paperless future is the aim; it is invariably women who make up the majority of administrative positions in the department and are consequently more vulnerable to job loss as a result of these proposals and cost saving measures. We observed no mitigating factors in the proposals to offset this inequality.

3.0 Concluding Remarks

NIRWN strongly disagree with the Department's finding (4.24 p 23) that 'it is not considered that this policy would have a differential impact because of an individual's gender'. This seems to be arrived at due to the fact that 95% of farmers are male. It is exactly this type of inference that makes the case for the need to develop systems that recognize all the farm family members and their contributions to the successful running of their farms. We have outlined above the need for disaggregated data and a farming future where the Department communicates and engages with all members of the farm family providing support to all who work on the farm. This we believe would not only contribute to equality but succession planning and up skilling of the farm family thereby future proofing our agriculture sector. NIRWN welcome the outcomes of this consultation and offer our support and help to the Minister and the Department in achieving its aim.