



Your Ref:
Our Ref: Misc/1
Date: 5th September 2008
Being dealt with by: Ms Sonya McAnulla
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John McKee
Organisation Improvement Branch
Room 559B
Dundonald House
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BELFAST
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Dear Mr McKee

RE: Equality Impact assessment on the roll out of DARD Direct

Introduction

I am writing on behalf of Omagh District Council in response to the consultation on the EQIA on the roll-out of DARD Direct.

At the outset I would like to highlight the long established and successful presence of DARD in Omagh. The Council is therefore encouraged to see that Omagh is recommended within the EQIA as one of the ten locations for the establishment of a DARD Direct office.

Given the rural nature of Northern Ireland, accessibility to DARD services is extremely important. Omagh is positioned in what is termed the 'South West Region' and is ideally located as the administrative centre for many decentralised services, not least DARD.

Omagh District Council is the lead Council for the North West Cluster for the delivery of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The North West Cluster includes Derry City Council, Limavady District Council, Omagh District Council, and Strabane District Council areas. Given the lead role undertaken by this Council it would be appropriate that a local DARD Direct office would be located in Omagh where close working relations can be advanced and maintained for the betterment of agricultural and rural development in the surrounding areas.

The following comments form the response of this Council to the consultation:

- The Council supports the proposed new service delivery model of DARD Direct, bringing all six main DARD business areas into a 'one stop shop'. The DARD offices in Omagh have over the years, successfully offered such a service which has been very well utilised by the farming community.
- Omagh has a successful farmers market every Monday located at the Omagh Agricultural Society grounds at Drumquin Road. This has traditionally been a day when farmers have attended the mart and then

conducted other related business with DARD on the same day. The location of a DARD Direct office remaining in Omagh is therefore an essential and convenient opportunity for farm families to co-ordinate their trip into town.

- The Council believes a radius of 16 miles for farm businesses from a DARD Direct office is a reasonable expectation given that alternate means of communication are available to those who may find travelling difficult or who do not wish to visit an office.
- The Omagh district is served by a good public transport service throughout the rural areas and the recently announced expansion of the rural public transport provision should enhance the availability of this service to and from the main town of Omagh.
- Omagh is a designated hub within the Regional Development Strategy and has traditionally been an administrative centre for a number of local and central government departments. Many of the citizens from surrounding district council areas such as Strabane, Cookstown, Dungannon, Fermanagh and even Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan gravitate to Omagh for services such as health, recreation and leisure, employment, as well as for education in the post-primary schools and South West College-Omagh Campus, therefore it is a centre already established for 'doing business' in a number of sectors not least with DARD. Omagh is therefore generally accepted as a central location for both employees and customers to avail of services and to work.
- The Council notes the statistics which highlight the higher level of disability among farmers compared to the general population in Northern Ireland. The Council therefore agrees with the proposal to provide a satisfactory service through encouraging contact online, by email, telephone or post as well as the opportunity to call at an office in person during the proposed extended hours.
- This Council operates a flexible working policy with opening hours from 8.00am to 6.00pm, and finds this service is easily accommodated by staff working out departmental rotas which suit them to ensure adequate cover during core hours. The Council therefore believes a flexible working hour's arrangements should benefit rather than hinder the proposed extension to DARD Direct office hours Monday to Friday from 9.00am to 5.00pm.
- The Council acknowledges that the current location of DARD in Omagh at Sperrin House is not ideal in relation to accessibility, although it is in close proximity to the bus station and to town centre car parking at Drumragh Avenue. At the Council meeting of 30th July 2008, consideration was given to correspondence received from DARD regarding service provision in the Rural Development Office in Omagh, and the proposal for a DARD Direct office being located in Omagh. In response to this, the Council wrote to Ms Pauline Keegan, Director of Rural Development asking that the car-parking issue be given further consideration or the potential to relocate to alternate premises is investigated.
- This Council recently opened its town centre based 'Public Services Centre' at its new building on High Street. This offers a one-stop-shop for dealing with customer advice relating to the Council's services; however it has an expanding remit to bring on board other government, community and voluntary bodies in the near future, to streamline customer services for the citizens of the district and beyond. The centre is convenient to a number of

town centre car parks, and town centre disabled parking bays as well as disabled car-parking located at the new Strule Arts Centre. The Council would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the potential for DARD to avail of the Public Service Centre for delivery of its services.

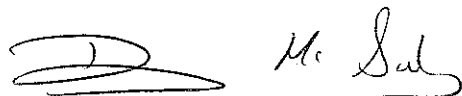
- The Council believes the difficulties around staff issues such as flexible working arrangements, travel times and transport issues, carers responsibilities, and associated costs of relocating to alternate work locations have as far as possible been adequately addressed by the mitigations highlighted in this consultation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to re-emphasise the central location of Omagh and its tradition as an administrative hub for the Rural West. The economy of the area is heavily reliant on farm and agric-food businesses and therefore has a high concentration of farm families and farming related businesses located in the district and surrounding area. The Omagh district is categorised as an area of high multiple deprivation, requiring services to be locally available so as to combat rural exclusion.

On behalf of Omagh District Council, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and we await the final report on the equality impact assessment.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D McSorley', written over a horizontal line.

D McSORLEY
Chief Executive