

DARD Direct Interview Notes

Organisation: Rural Community Network
Contact: Michael Hughes
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Have we accurately captured the impacts of the implementation of the DARD Direct proposal on farmers and farm families / DARD staff for each of the section 75 categories?

- DARD Direct is a very good idea in terms of a one stop shop.
- Choices of office locations need to be made carefully, the prospect of Dungiven as a site for DARD Direct might not be appropriate as the movement of farmers would dictate that they perhaps wouldn't travel to that location in everyday business. If Magherafelt was selected a location for its area then the service to Coleraine and Cookstown would be negatively affected.
- DARD Direct offices need to be readily accessible with plenty of parking, and as such locating on the outskirts of towns in industrial business parks such as the office in Newry, is ideal.

What other impacts do you feel may be experienced by farmers and farm families / DARD staff through the implementation of the DARD Direct proposal?

- There needs to be clarification over whether the service is exclusively for the farming community or aimed towards the rural dweller in general
- As staff are moved into the new DARD Direct office structure, administration staff might be affected more than technical / non-admin staff.
- The opening hours of DARD Direct offices will need to be looked at. Some farmers / those carrying out evening work for example at sales, will need to be catered for by looking at the option of keeping an office open into the evening one night per week.
- RCN is concerned that the potential changes in location through the roll out of DARD Direct will have a disproportionate impact on female staff, particularly those involved in administrative roles, in part-time work patterns and those having responsibilities for dependents. These staff may have to make major life choices when the new offices are announced.

What other mitigating actions do you feel we should consider to minimise any impact on farmers and farm families / DARD staff?

- The important feature to remember about DARD Direct is that it is an improved level of service provision. If this is done adequately then any initial friction with the roll out (e.g. customer discontent with office location) will be out weighed by long term gain.
- The level of staff competency in each office will need to be high in order to satisfy DARD's objective of improving service. This will also help to satisfy the customer preference of a personal service as fewer queries are referred on to other colleagues.
- Where some areas suffer from lack of coverage in relation to access to final location of a DARD Direct office, an outreach service could be implemented to serve rural communities.
- Some farmers have a mental barrier in terms of distances they're willing to travel to get to DARD offices; this will need to be addressed in the

marketing of DARD Direct.

- DARD needs to consider how to minimise the impact of new potential new locations and longer office opening hours, particularly for staff with part-time work patterns and responsibilities for dependents.