

Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster,
475 Antrim Road,
Belfast.
BT15 3BD.
03-sept-2008

RE: Consultation on the Equality Impact Assessment on the Roll-Out of DARD Direct.

Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to reply on behalf of the 'Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster' on the above consultation as published by DARD. The recommendations as submitted were discussed in context by our Agri Affairs Committee.

Specific Recommendations / Concerns.

- YFCU fully support the concept of Dard Direct.
- We believe that DARD needs to re-examine the number of offices and locations, in relation to the need of NI wide service delivery. In particular we would have serious concerns surrounding the removal of the Newtownards Office, and the centralisation of services to Downpartick, as we feel that this will place too much of a burden on farmers in the North Down and Strangford areas.
- DARD Direct also needs to focus upon being 'DARD ACCESSIBLE', in particular we feel that DARD has a golden opportunity to extend its services, by becoming more flexible with its opening hours, lunchtimes ,evenings, weekends etc in a bid to meet the needs of the growing numbers of "part-time" farmers and also farmers family members.
- Car/Large Vehicle parking facilities is an area which we believe will be essential to get right if DARD Direct is to work smoothly. Throughout our membership this has been a re-current theme about the current facilities and the appalling chances of being able to get parked and access the services needed by farmers.
- DARD Direct must be able to cope better at peak times, e.g. SFP application submission, we look forward to seeing greater staff provision in order to minimise waiting times.
- Farmers should be able to get in contact with the DARD staff member they require immediately, without having to go through the quango of a call system. We would recommend strongly the proposal of an appointment system, to improve service and time efficiency for all parties.

- Specific services eg, apples/mushrooms/vegetables must be located in the relevant locations.
- We feel it is really important that DARD staff should be trained appropriately to be able to deal successfully with farmers requirements, short term contract staff should not be used in front line dealing with farmers.
- Office user groups should be established with local farmers, to ensure that DARD Direct is satisfying regional needs.

Summary.

The YFCU fully supports the DARD Direct concept, but we do feel strongly that the 10 office delivery model is flawed, in the lack of cover it provides for the farmers of North Down and the Ards Peninsula.

The number of offices and locations needs to be re-examined to ensure that NI service delivery can be achieved.

DARD should make every effort to ensure trained and knowledgeable staff are available in the DARD Direct offices, these staff are the frontline of contact with farmers and must be fully competent.

There is a golden chance for DARD to ensure that every new office facility meets with requirements, for access, parking etc.

Flexibility should be an aim for any new service provided, opening hours need to be extended as many farmers find it difficult to operate within a 9-5 system.

Conclusion.

On behalf of the YFCU I would like to thank DARD for seeking our opinions and recommendations on this matter and look forward to being able to do so again. If you need any further information or clarification on any of the above responses please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Faithfully,

Smyth McCann
Vice-President YFCU, Chairman Agri-Affairs Committee.

