

NI Review of Deprivation (The Noble Index)

Response from RCN

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above consultation. The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and community development.

RCN would like to make a number of general points in responding to your document. It is therefore our intention to concentrate on the implications for rural communities, in particular those that are most disadvantaged, experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

Background to Response

When the Noble Index of Deprivation was first launched in 2001 expectations were high as much had been promised. However, rural groups working to address disadvantage on the ground quickly realised if they did not feature in the top 20% of Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) they were unlikely to be seen as a target group for resources or funding. From discussions with its member groups across Northern Ireland, RCN recognised there were serious implications on Noble's value as a tool in addressing rural poverty. Since then RCN has highlighted (alongside rural Councils, the 12 Rural Support Networks, the Rural Development Council, Community Group Members and others) its concerns with the 2001 version of Noble and what should be addressed in an updated version.

Definitions Linked to Usage

As a starting point it is fundamental to have an agreed focus of what is meant by deprivation which is linked to usage. The present focus of Noble is heavily orientated towards benefit based deprivation which, although helpful, is also limited in its approach when tackling poverty. RCN consider the Irish National Anti Poverty Strategy's definition a helpful starting point as it links the multiple levels of poverty: material, cultural and social: "People are living in poverty if their income and resources (Material, Cultural and Social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society". Those in rural poverty are often further disadvantaged in a rural setting because of 'Limited Access to Services', 'Mobility', 'Visibility', 'Culture', 'Isolation'.

MDM & Rural Society

The Noble Index's proposal to combine 7 separate domains (5 of the originals domains remain: 'Income'; 'Employment'; 'Health'; 'Education'; 'Access to Services' with 2 now re-titled as: 'Crime' & 'Living Environment') into one overall weighted score labelled Multiple-Deprivation (MDM) is the cause of some concern for RCN. From a rural perspective, if MDM is used, people living in poverty in rural areas are less likely to be identified for two reasons – the dispersed nature of the rural population and the geographic mixed income/lifestyle nature of rural Northern Ireland. As indicated above the basis of using 50% of MDM derived from 'Benefits' is too narrow a focus for addressing deprivation. MDM rates the impact of poor health (15%) and educational achievement (15 %) too low. In addition with only 10% weighting allocated to 'Access to Services' it would seem there is a rural insensitivity. For example the ward of Belcoo and Garrison in County Fermanagh is ranked number 1/566 at 'Access Deprivation' but in contrast is ranked 251/566 at MDM. If a single Multiple-Deprivation (MDM) overall score/rank is to be retained there must be a separation of rural Northern Ireland from the four cities and larger regional towns. Furthermore a specific rural sensitive MDM would help capture the nature of rural poverty. This would in turn help represent the different physical and social characteristics between rural and urban areas in NI and ensure funders and policy makers are comparing like with like.

Cultural and Social Deprivation

The lack of reference in the present consultation document to any data sources in relation to cultural, social or leisure activities, e.g. dropping of libraries, is an obvious omission. Likewise with the exception to the reference to children, there is no reference to how deprivation/poverty affects different groups in society. For example, what are the implications for the 9 Section 75 groupings? (Young people and access to youth services, older people and health deprivation, effects of religion on access to services.) Whilst data may not be available, this underlines a need for other information at a local level to be admissible if, for example, a group is making a case for resources.

Proofing Noble 2004

It is important that use of the Multiple-Deprivation Index 2004 is proofed in relation to different policy areas, for example community relations, how will this data help a 'Peace III' Programme identify areas/groups affected by sectarian division; what does it mean for disadvantaged group identification within the Rural Policy? Clearly, it is essential to Rural Proof and Equality Proof the selection of Data Sets, and most basically we need to make use of data that helps tackle the particular Northern Ireland aspect of poverty experienced through the impact of the "Troubles". If data is not available now, then research to enable it to be introduced as soon as possible should be supported.

Comprehensive Guidance Notes

At a practical level 'Guidance Notes' should be provided that explain which indicators/domains are appropriate to use for particular circumstances, and encourage funders or other resource holders to develop policies for targeting which allow other sources of information to be used alongside Noble in a transparent manner. For example RCN has reservations on the use of MDM and the 'Income' and 'Employment' domains as a means of identifying areas of low/weak community infrastructure. Our experience and research to date indicates that these are inappropriate measures to identify a phenomenon which is essentially very localised and a result of varied factors, many of which are not captured solely in government statistics. This would further indicate the need for 'Guidance Notes' which indicate the value of localised qualitative data in conjunction with statistics.

Concluding Remarks - Ensuring an Opportunity is Not Lost

Unless the issues linked to rural poverty and the usage of 'Noble 2004' is comprehensively addressed, policy makers, funders and support organisations will be faced again with a dataset which is limited and the opportunity to tackle poverty across all of Northern Ireland (both urban and rural) will have escaped yet again.

We hope these comments are useful.

Yours sincerely



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