



Supporting community development, strengthening our rural communities

Brendan McDonnell, director of CENI, talks about a pioneering approach to the evaluation of the Rural Community Development Support Service (RCDSS), which funds rural network organisations to deliver community development support in rural communities across Northern Ireland over the period 2012-2016

This exercise generated a substantial evidence base on the impact of the RCDSS and illustrated the critical role the rural networks play in improving the lives of rural communities and in delivering rural policy objectives on tackling poverty and social isolation.

This is significant both for Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (now DAERA) and the networks as they now have a robust evidence base to demonstrate the value of community development support, which can be used to help inform and shape future rural development policy and support programmes.

However, it hasn't always been like this. The outcomes of community development activity are notoriously difficult to define and measure. DARD, concerned that previous evaluations had not adequately captured these outcomes, appointed CENI in

2014 to carry out a social impact assessment of the RCDSS.

CENI went to work on applying its 'Measuring Change' methodology which had been specifically designed to capture those 'hard to measure' qualitative changes of development activity.

The first phase of the evaluation evidenced how the networks were building community development infrastructure within rural areas by supporting groups, individual farmers and community social capital. A second phase demonstrated the difference that this made to these communities in terms of enabling them to face challenges, attract resources, access public services and participate in new planning structures.

The CENI evaluation identified the value that rural support networks add by creating stepped linkages between hard to

reach rural communities and public service providers – from first contact through to trust – which improved communication and facilitated co-design.

"The CENI report has been very useful in demonstrating the positive impact that the RCDSS has had in rural communities and will inform the consideration of any future support for local rural community development," said John Waddell, Rural Development South, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Nicholas McCrickard, Manager, County Down Rural Community Network, said: "CENI's report provides an essential evaluation of the local rural support networks, highlighting the complex nature of rural community development while capturing the myriad projects and talents that exist. We will use this to inform the development of community support for years to come."