FUTURE TENSE
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR RURAL NI

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It’s only when we stop to take stock of the past decade that we begin to appreciate the scale and pace of change in Northern Ireland. We now have a settled Assembly which by 2016 will have completed two continuous terms of devolved government (despite numerous political impasses the latest of which has developed on welfare reform). The development of the internet, mobile communications and the general concept of connectivity is changing the way business, government and even our personal lives are conducted. The great recession of the past six years has wrought havoc on the global economy and has led to public sector austerity across Europe. From the consultations on the Department’s budgets before Christmas it became clear that we are about to start feeling the brunt of austerity in Northern Ireland and will do so for the next number of years. Globalisation of the world economy is a tide that can’t be turned back and provides distinct challenges to Northern Ireland as local companies compete with their counterparts in low wage economies across the world. These are just a few of the changes we have seen over the past decade. Political commitment to meet the needs of rural areas will be required right across the Executive and putting rural proofing on a statutory footing, as DARD Minister Michelle O’Neill has proposed, will help. We know from experience here and across other regions that local solutions, enabled by Government policy flexibilities, are often more effective than those imposed on a one size fits all basis.

The Westminster election in May will be followed by Assembly elections next year.

The great recession of the past six years has wrought havoc on the global economy and has led to public sector austerity across Europe.
So what are our key asks for politicians at the local, regional and national level?

- Despite the challenges of re-configuring health and social care services in an era of austerity, policy makers still need to meet the needs of a dispersed largely rural population.
- To continue to focus on social justice – and to ensure that policies are designed and delivered to meet the needs of poorer households in rural communities who have a very different experience of poverty than their urban counterparts.
- To protect frontline services in Education and Higher and Further Education to enable the Executive’s over-arching aim to grow and re-balance the economy.
- To take the right decisions on infrastructure spending that will allow the economy to grow in a sustainable way across the region.
- Continue to balance the need for sustainable regional development with the need to protect the environment.
- Undertake to protect the livelihoods of farmers to secure the future of the industry and limit the influence of corporate food producers who have driven down farm-gate prices.
- Continue and develop the work already undertaken to extend digital and mobile connectivity to all rural communities, no matter how remote, to facilitate economic development, learning opportunities and easier interaction with the state.

I acknowledge that it is difficult for politicians to take a long term view when they work to a five year mandate and must always keep one eye on the next election, but that is the challenge they must meet. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado said “Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace el camino al andar”. This translates as “searcher, there is no road. We make the road by walking.” The future, like the concept of community, will be created by the decisions and choices we make in response to events as they occur.

AIDAN CAMPBELL
Policy Officer
RCN

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Future Healthcare - Fewer Sites Better Access

The pattern of health service delivery has been changing rapidly in the last 10 years and this will continue over the next decade within a context of constrained finances, centralisation of specialised services and increasing demands from an ageing population with complex needs.

There have been three reports on the health service in Northern Ireland in the last 15 years and they all point towards fewer hospitals, although this term will become increasingly redundant in the future as we will talk about services rather than buildings. There are 10 acute hospitals now in Northern Ireland compared to 16 in the year 2000; we can expect this total to reduce further in the next decade into about 5 or 6 service networks.

This is a necessary change as Northern Ireland spends so much of its resources trying to provide too many services on multiple sites. It will be more efficient in the future to focus resources on fewer sites while ensuring access for patients from all areas.

In parallel to this, there will be more services moving into the community and services that we would traditionally view as hospital services will be provided in local clinics. This will include services such as outpatient clinics, X-rays and scans, plus a full range of services such as physiotherapy, podiatry, occupational therapy and even chemotherapy provision. This will create a system where patients rarely have to attend hospitals as most of the services will be provided in local clinics alongside GP services.

Strategies to underpin these developments have already begun with GPs organising their Practices in Federations of Practices. In addition, the Department of Health has begun a ‘Hub and Spoke’ model for premises which will provide Health and Care Centres in communities where these enhanced services can be delivered.

There will need to be about 20 Health and Care Centres throughout Northern Ireland if we are going to be able to shift services into the community while specialised services will be concentrated on fewer sites. If this plan works effectively, then more than 90% of a community’s health needs can be provided locally and hospital should only have to be attended for complex procedures such as an operation or an invasive diagnostic procedure.

There are 10 acute hospitals now in Northern Ireland compared to 16 in the year 2000; we can expect this total to reduce further in the next decade into about five or six service networks.
These changes will not be confined to Northern Ireland but will take place across the UK and indeed, in most countries in the western world. This will happen because it’s the only way that we will be able to cope with the rising demands of an ageing population with more diseases such as diabetes, and in increase in strokes and cancer.

If I was in a rural community I would, as a first step, look to ensure the continuation of my GP practice. This will become increasingly difficult as there is a serious GP workforce crisis looming. A quarter of GPs are over 55 years old and ready to retire with young doctors refusing to become GPs due to overwhelming workloads.

Next I would look to develop a substantial primary care team with district nurses, health visitors and community mental health services at its core.

I would then look to ensure that a Health and Care Centre was sited in my community or at the very least, close by. I would want the Health and Care Centre to be fully resourced with X-ray facilities, scans, outpatient clinics, chemotherapy and palliative care services and I would want this backed up with at least one GP practice.

Things are going to change and if we want to maintain the viability of healthcare in our rural communities, we will need to devolve resources and staff to local areas to provide local services. Advocacy will be the key.

A quarter of GPs are over 55 years old and ready to retire with young doctors refusing to become GPs due to overwhelming workloads.

**DR TOM BLACK**
General Practitioner in Derry Chairman of the BMA’s GP committee
What future for rural schools?

In the school year 2013/14, there were 839 primary schools in Northern Ireland. Of these, there were 457 schools or 55% of all primary schools defined by the Department of Education (DENI) as rural schools.

The Policy for Sustainable Schools (2009) upon which future area planning of the schools’ estate is based indicates that the minimum (not optimal) enrolment for schools in rural areas is 105 pupils. Drawing on DENI’s database of schools, we can disaggregate the current position of rural primary schools across Northern Ireland.

There are a number of observations which can be made on primary schools data (see Table 1). First, just over half of rural schools are unsustainable, as defined by DENI, with roughly the same percentage in the maintained and controlled sectors. Second, half (four out of eight) rural controlled integrated primary schools are unsustainable whereas none of the four grant maintained integrated schools are under threat and have high enrolments. Third, six of the seven ‘other maintained’ schools (which are mainly Irish language schools) are unsustainable.

### Table 1: Rural primary schools in Northern Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Type</th>
<th>Number of rural primary schools</th>
<th>Average enrolment numbers</th>
<th>Number of unsustainable rural primary schools (&lt;105 pupils)</th>
<th>% of rural schools which are unsustainable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RC Maintained</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled Integrated</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Maintained (mainly Irish language schools)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: calculated from DENI 2013/14 primary school data base
If the area planning process designed to rationalise the future schools’ estate is fully implemented, then 52% or 237 rural schools will close. This is likely to decimate rural communities and witness a significant decline in young families unable to access local schools.

If we consider the post-primary sector, then the situation is even more difficult for rural schools where 70% of them are considered unsustainable (Table 2).

Table 2: Rural post-primary schools in Northern Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Type</th>
<th>Number of rural post-primary schools</th>
<th>Average enrolment numbers</th>
<th>Number of unsustainable post-primary rural schools (&lt;600 pupils)</th>
<th>% of rural schools which are unsustainable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RC Maintained</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary RC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled Integrated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: calculated from DENI 2013/14 primary school data base
Over two-thirds of RC maintained post-primary rural schools are under threat whereas three-quarters of controlled schools do not meet the numbers threshold for sustainability. The number of rural post-primary integrated schools is very small (n=4) and the average enrolment data is skewed by the fact they include Lagan College which has an enrolment of 1260 pupils and is defined as a post-primary rural school.

According to DENI’s Sustainable Schools Policy, a stable enrolment trend is only one of six criteria in assessing a school’s educational viability. The others are: quality educational experience; sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. However, the area planning process conducted by each of the Education and Library Boards focuses on enrolments, education attainment and budgets via planning profiles for each school to the exclusion of other criteria. There is therefore an inconsistent approach to assessing school sustainability.

So what, if anything, can be done to halt the decline in rural areas with this radical schools’ closure policy? The Minister of Education launched (January 2015) a consultation document entitled Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education in which he set out his vision for shared education where schools of all management types are encouraged and facilitated to provide further opportunities for the education together of pupils. The typical geography of a rural area is that the community is served by one maintained and one controlled school, offering the possibility of shared education. Without a loss of cultural identity, schools of different management type can collaborate to deliver shared education. Although this approach is not confined to rural areas, the demographics and logistics of rural communities provide a natural setting for shared education to flourish.

There are, of course, other important reasons for engaging in shared education beyond that of school sustainability. The Minister for Education notes:

• As a consequence of schools collaborating, pupils benefit from enhanced curricular delivery and access to a broader range of subjects and resources. Teachers also benefit from improved professional development opportunities and sharing good practice. Senior leaders and governors across sectors work more closely together and collaboration can become a vehicle for school improvement (Sharing Works, 2015: iv)

How can schools get involved in shared education? In December 2014 the Education and Library Boards opened applications for funding under the Delivering Social Change Shared Education Signature Project. This is a £25m package funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, DENI and OFMdFM (see details at: http://www.sepni.org/site/). The first phase of applications was aimed at schools already involved in cross-community collaborative work. The second phase of applications will open in Spring 2015 with a view to implementation over a 3 school-year period (2015/16 – 2017/18). Rural schools, please note.

COLIN KNOX
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Ulster University
Homelessness in rural communities is more hidden and isn’t helped by the lack of temporary accommodation. There are fewer social housing options and it can be difficult to predict future housing demand in certain areas. In terms of property conditions, unfitness levels are certainly higher. While this has been a long standing issue, the ending of financial assistance through the Home Improvement Grants Scheme has probably had a negative effect. Rural homes are also less energy efficient, although organisations such as Bryson Charitable Group and the Housing Executive have been active in promoting the various energy efficiency schemes available.

So what are the opportunities and challenges for rural communities? The most immediate issue is the introduction of a new welfare reform system which will definitely have an impact. It will be important for the NI Assembly and local government to ensure that rural communities are property resourced to deal with increased demand for advice services and to make sure that rural dwellers have full access to digital services as expected by the new Universal Credit system.

More generally, with owner occupation already in decline and with restricted access to mortgage lending likely to continue, we will see increasing numbers of rural families renting accommodation. Demand for affordable rented housing in the form of social housing will continue. However ongoing problems with latent demand testing, land availability and investment levels for new social housing provision will need to be addressed in order to avoid higher levels of unmet need. As such, there is likely to be increasing reliance on the private rented sector which is currently less well regulated than social housing. Private landlord registration and the possibility of longer leases could offer private tenants more security and better conditions for those renting at the lower end of the market.

The Social Housing Reform Programme (SHRP) managed by the Department for Social Development (DSD), should hopefully provide rural communities with an opportunity to shape the future of social housing locally. DSD is currently consulting on a tenant participation strategy, including a new framework to oversee how social housing landlords are regulated. This is a positive development and the outcome of both should mean more involvement of tenants in the design and delivery of housing and related services to their communities. The SHRP will also be considering the future of the Housing Executive and possible new structures for managing social housing. Tenants have a central role to play in helping to inform this debate and should have the ultimate say in who should be their landlord.

Finally, I believe that the Housing Executive should be acknowledged for the important role that it has played in supporting rural communities. It has been able to achieve this by being accessible, ‘on the ground’ working with local groups as well as Rural Community Network and also by having a more strategic oversight of issues demonstrated through Rural Action Plans. Moving forward, under the reform of social housing, I believe it is essential that rural housing remains on the agenda and forms part of the function of any new regional statutory housing body in the future.
As recovery approaches however, it is important to look at what kind of employment is being created and where it is being located. It is sometimes erroneously believed that as the economy recovers, new jobs will replace those that were lost like for like, but this almost never happens. There is a danger that the quality of jobs being created in this recovery will leave the Northern Ireland economy permanently weaker into the future.

The construction sector in Northern Ireland saw the largest fall in employment across the economy. Even now, over six years since the property crash, there are still 30% fewer jobs in the sector than there were in 2008. Many of the jobs in the construction sector would have been mid-level skilled positions that commanded decent wages and formed the backbone of employment in many communities.

Another sector that has lost a significant number of employees since 2008 has been the retail sector. 13% of jobs have been lost in this sector since 2008 and the effects of this can be seen in towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland. Almost all other sectors of the economy in Northern Ireland are now back at the level of jobs they had in 2008. However, the regional or geographical spread of employment in the construction and retail sectors was and still is the most balanced of all sectors in Northern Ireland. So while a recovery in other sectors may benefit overall employment, it could remain very unbalanced from a regional perspective.

The question for the Northern Ireland economy now is how to make up for the 40,000+ jobs that still need to be recovered, where they will be created and in what sectors.

Northern Ireland is the lowest wage region of the UK, on almost every measure. While public sector wages in Northern Ireland are on average 2% lower than in the rest of the UK, private sector wages are 26% lower in Northern Ireland. There is a compositional dimension to this as well. Low wages are particularly prevalent in particular industries such as retail, hospitality and social care. Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of jobs in these sectors than the rest of the UK.

The next phase of employment growth will need to be monitored for both its regional spread and the quality of the jobs being created. The construction sector will likely never return to its 2008 peak output, meaning that job creation will have to come from other sectors. However, if the remaining employment growth was to come from the retail sector and other low paying service industries, that may permanently reduce the spending power of households, especially in rural communities.

What the Northern Ireland economy needs is a plan to develop skilled, well-paid private sector employment across Northern Ireland. Rather than using gimmicks such as corporation tax to lure in foreign direct investment (mostly to urban areas) there needs to be a focus on investing in the existing growth sectors of Northern Ireland’s economy. Areas like agri-food and sustainable energy could provide such employment and a significant boost to productivity in Northern Ireland overall. The recession that hit Northern Ireland did not affect all regions equally - a plan for real recovery needs to acknowledge this.

PAUL McFLYNN
Economist
The Nevin Economic Research Institute
sometimes, in order to see the future, it is useful to revisit the past. Before the banking crisis of 2007, rural Northern Ireland was enjoying a period of relative prosperity.

Economically we enjoyed a 20 year low in unemployment rates, the building boom was at its height and there was a net growth in inward migration from the EU. The booming economy south of the border created significant trading and employment opportunities. Then came the banking crisis and the longest economic recession since the thirties.

The net effect of the recession was to magnify underlying structural weaknesses in the rural economy which had been masked by the property boom. The collapse of the building trade across the island of Ireland resulted in a net loss of 20,000 construction jobs in NI. Farming, which had been sustained by double jobbing in construction, now came under huge pressures and incomes collapsed.

The growth of the big supermarket chains as part of the peace dividend led to increased competition and drove down farm gate prices for milk and many dairy producers were forced out of production. Rural populations which had ceased declining post millennium once again have witnessed net emigration.

Almost one in four children in NI is growing up in relative poverty. Child poverty is not an exclusively rural issue but currently a significant and challenging rural dimension is emerging. Looking back to figures for 2009-10, Derry City council, with After Housing Costs child poverty rates of 50% and Belfast with 31%, were first and third worst of the 26 council districts. (These figures are based on the Households Below Average Incomes annual survey After Housing Costs). The most recent local government figures 2010-13 show that Fermanagh, at 36%, now has the highest child poverty rate closely followed by Coleraine 33%, and Ballymoney, Down, & Newry & Mourne councils all on 30%. Derry’s child poverty figures have fallen to 29% and Belfast 22% is now 2% below the NI average of 24%.

There are a number of economic factors at play here including the decline in traditional employment sectors such as fishing, farming and construction. Reform of public administration has disproportionately impacted in rural districts. Other sectors are also undergoing change, notably retail, with a marked decline in shops in provincial towns as the move to online shopping accelerates. Similarly the banking sector where many rural areas have lost their local branches is also changing. Where new jobs are created, the digital economy and service industries are key growth sectors. However, these are attracted to areas with both high broadband speed and access to graduate trained labour, typically urban areas.

The net effect of the recession was to magnify underlying structural weaknesses in the rural economy which had been masked by the property boom.

“...
Bank has found that a 10% increase in broadband penetration increases economic growth by 1.3% over the long term. Yet there is a very real divide between urban and rural broadband speeds. In the UK, some commercial providers are advertising broadband speeds of 240Mbps while many rural communities average 1-2Mbps. Rural schools experience this digital divide as well with many incapable of fully exploiting internet capable technology.

Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2010 on Minimum Income Standards established that rural households would need to earn between 10-20% more than their urban counterparts in order to offset the increased costs of living rurally. Among those on basic out-of-work benefits in rural areas, single people get only about a third of the required minimum, families with children about a half, and pensioners are typically 20 per cent short of the minimum. Therefore, people in rural areas generally need to work and earn well above the minimum wage to make ends meet. But since many rural jobs are poorly paid, many people have substantially less than they need, even if they work.

If we are to address rural child poverty then we need area based solutions. These need to be both income and opportunity focused. Income measures such as paying the “living wage”, affordable and accessible childcare and targeted benefits that address the higher costs of living rurally all may help immediately. Improving educational outcomes for children through early intervention programmes may address variations in educational attainment over the longer term. There is also a critical need to improve broadband in rural to sustain jobs and to attract inward investment.

“Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2010 on Minimum Income Standards established that rural households would need to earn between 10-20% more than their urban counterparts in order to offset the increased costs of living rurally.”

**FERGUS COOPER**  
Northern Ireland Head of Country  
Save the Children
Our eleven new councils will, on Wednesday 1 April, become responsible for the overwhelming majority of planning applications and for the preparation and oversight of eleven new Area Development Plans - each with its own unique set of local planning policies and land-use zonings. More significantly than all of this, the new Councils, along with their statutory partners and communities, will be formulating their first Community Plans for the joint planning and delivery of services and opportunities for all.

These Community Plans will set out the vision and overall strategic priorities for the new Council areas. Some of these priorities will impact on land use planning policies and zonings and in preparing the new Area Development Plans the planners embedded in councils will aim to support these priorities. By 2025 we will be half way through our third generation of Community Plans and land use planning will be integrated with Community Planning and economic and physical regeneration.

So, in 2025 we will be looking back on how some key challenges and crunch issues have been addressed including:

- Making best use of our land and all its resources to support sustainable social, economic and environmental wellbeing.
- Developing community engagement processes which are second nature to Councils and statutory partners and have the confidence and participation of everyone and every community.
- Delivering a planning system which is integrated with regeneration and development and fully facilitates the rights of all interested parties.
- Resolving the tensions between the desire of many to live in single houses in the countryside and the associated obstacles of access to services, schools, health facilities and support and opportunities.
- Providing land for social and affordable housing in all areas including those traditionally the preserve of the well-to-do and in doing so creating balanced and socially mixed communities.
- Preventing the next housing development bubble which will surely come along with the same devastating impacts unless we plan and manage our land in a more sensible and sustainable way.
- Reviving towns across the region which fell victim to the rush to out of town mega-stores (which in 2025 will be obsolete).
- Solving the conundrum of why, in the age of global communications, even IT based companies (and thus jobs) continue to cluster in our major cities.
- Finding better ways of commuting together and having more enjoyable and less costly journeys along the way.
- Making better use of all our energy sources so that the tensions between the main areas of consumption and of production are eased.
- Contributing to social justice by becoming ethical consumers who cherish locally produced goods and refuse to be party to the exploitation of producers and workers anywhere.

Of course successfully addressing many of these challenges requires finance. One thing we have learned in the past few years is the unprecedented financial actions local, national and European authorities can take (in our name) to rescue banks and wealthy people who take unfathomable risks. Actions on a similar scale over the next few years to rescue the rest of us from the current waves of recession and austerity would provide the finances to undertake these and many other challenges.

COLM BRADLEY
Director
Community Places
Migration to rural Northern Ireland: facts and challenges.

Northern Ireland is one of the areas that experienced significant changes to its population due to immigration in recent decades. We know from Census 2011 that overall figures are small, but the relative change in the population in some areas was immense.

Take Dungannon, a place that was recorded as having the highest proportion of people born in EU accession countries (6.8%). Within this District Council area, the Ballysaggart Ward includes 825 people or 30% of the population who are EU and other migrants. Northern Ireland has become a place of immigration as well as of emigration.

There are some longstanding and settled minority ethnic groups living in Northern Ireland including communities from China, India and Bangladesh. Recent arrivals are from Eastern Europe, Portugal and South East Asia, notably the Philippines. Twenty-five per cent more Accession 8 citizens registered with the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) compared to other parts of the UK with many people moving from Poland and Lithuania.

It is estimated that over the ten-year period from 2000, 122,000 international long-term migrants arrived in Northern Ireland, while 97,000 left (Russell 2012). Census 2011 records some of these changes. In 2001, 1.5% of the population was born outside the UK and Ireland. This figure rises to 4.5% in 2011. Meanwhile the ethnic minority groups accounts for 1.8% (an increase of 1% from the previous Census).

What marks this era of migration from previous experiences is the way that migrants have settled in urban and rural communities, including Belfast and Derry. Significant numbers chose to live in communities throughout Northern Ireland and in the process they have transformed rural spaces, bringing flexible labour for the food processing and agriculture sectors, providing diverse cultural perspectives and enhancing the general vibrancy of local communities.

As a migration destination, rural society in Northern Ireland has also faced major challenges. Not least in the demand for interpretations within the health sector. With as many as 41 languages requested (Northern Ireland Health Service 2014), it is of little surprise that service providers often struggle to meet demand (McAreavey 2010). But it is not always appropriate to deliver existing services through translation or interpretation. Cultural sensitivities may call for an alternate approach.

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1 Accession 8 or A8 countries refer to the eight European countries from Eastern Europe who joined the EU in 2004. They are comprised of Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

2 Between 2004 and 2011 migrants from A8 countries and seeking employment in the UK were required to register under the Worker Registration Scheme. This afforded those migrants access to basic benefits (e.g. Housing Benefit, Tax Credits and potentially after 12 months Jobseekers Allowance). In the absence of definitive figures it and other data (e.g. Health Card Registrations) are frequently used as a proxy to measure numbers of migrants during that period.
Migrants are over-represented within private sector housing, something that is fairly typical of migrant housing patterns (Census 2011, Perry 2008). An ongoing challenge for society here is to avoid the ghettoisation of all social groups. Section 75 is used within everyday language, but questions still remain over the extent to which society here is accepting of diversity. Over a five-year period there was a decrease in acceptance of a marriage to an Eastern European among the majority community (McDermott 2013). Furthermore, the prevalence of race hate crime and the belief that it is under-reported, led to the establishment of a dedicated phone-line for reporting incidences (http://www.psni.police.uk/general_operation_reiner_hate_crime_update).

These matters concern the politics of identity and recognition and present a complex social and spatial landscape. Moving forward, and in the more immediate term, there are many pressing challenges. Possible cuts to public expenditure in the medium term will increase the need to stimulate the economy. Currently there is a serious lack of recognition of overseas qualifications (Irwin et al. 2014) and this represents a lost opportunity for the economy in Northern Ireland. Opportunities exist also. The implementation of new Council structures and the associated new powers of community planning and regeneration offer mechanisms for rural communities to truly engage with newfound ethnic diversity. In the longer term, the trick will be to ensure interplay between reconciliation activities that attend to traditional sectarian divisions while also addressing these more recent challenges of social integration that have arisen from immigration. Otherwise there is a danger that recent migrants will exist in parallel to the majority communities – spatially, socially and economically - with untold consequences of such division.

References


We have a range of key natural resources with the potential to produce significant volumes of renewable energy. Our less densely populated rural western region could produce more biomass without impacting the supply of food. Our wind resource is one of the most powerful and persistent on the planet and we are surrounded by ocean with strong tidal variation and big waves. Exploiting these resources locally can change our relationship with energy, producing a low carbon supply, reducing dependence on imports and opening the prospect for local enterprise and employment.

More efficient use must be the first priority both from an economic and an environmental perspective. Since buildings use half of all the energy consumed, better insulation can increase comfort whilst reducing consumption. This region was a leader in developing renewable biomass in the form of willow, farmed on a two to three year cycle, to produce woodchip for heating in place of oil. At present woodchip is mostly used in larger applications like Omagh College, Cookstown Leisure Centre and hotels where the boiler facilities are under ongoing supervised management. The technology lends itself better to this managed boiler approach used widely across Europe in district heating systems. In Scandanavia and Eastern Europe, district heating plants often cogenerate electricity and heat with piped hot water transferring the heat to supply a village, housing or an industrial complex.

Much of our existing forest resources that are managed in the public interest by the Department of Agriculture were acquired into public ownership and first planted in the 1960s. The percentage of land afforested in Northern Ireland is less than than our neighbours in Scotland and the rest of Ireland. Balcas are the major company currently exploiting the output from these forests. Their wood pellet product which was developed from waste timber has gained an important position in the market for generating domestic heat replacing imported oil.

Tidal energy is another renewable resource that we must seek to develop and exploit in the coming decade. Queen’s University Belfast has been developing ocean energy machines for many years. One recent
development, Aquamarine, is a structure fixed to the sea bed near the shore with a hinged flap that nods in the ebb and flow of the tide, pumping sea water through pipes to drive a generator on the adjacent dry shore. The European Marine Energy Centre on Orkney is now the key global demonstration centre for these technologies which will soon appear on coasts around the globe.

Wind energy has become more controversial as recent turbines have become so large and unsightly. Exploitation on this scale has a huge impact on the landscape with windfarms compromising our environmental assets especially when placed in the middle of some of our most scenic countryside. However wind remains as an important renewable energy resource. The landscape issue is not unique to this region and some European countries with coastlines on the North Sea are now harnessing the wind at sea just beyond the horizon from their important coastal seascapes. This approach is, of course, more expensive but perhaps when we take into consideration that our main urban demand is near the coast, it may become more viable (and of course we have Lough Neagh!).

The infrastructure that delivers our electricity has emerged from a model based on a small number of high capacity central power stations using imported fossil fuels located close to the bigger demand in city areas. The network of transmission lines, transformers and switches that run out through the country move energy in one direction, from the generator to consumers. A similar model has evolved south of the border. Now, a single island electricity market operating and interconnected within a wider European single electricity market needs to be supported by an infrastructure that can capture generation from a much higher number of low power, variable and intermittent sources. These new renewable sources are distributed across the existing network, mainly in the West of Northern Ireland. To deliver a secure supply it is not sufficient to just beef up the network, expand the cables and create two way-flow. A reconfigured network needs to have intelligent control capacity to cope with matching an intermittent, distributed and variable supply to the requirements of demand shaped and prioritised through need and pricing. This “SmartGrid” concept is key to the evolution of an electricity supply system depending on a high level of renewable supply.

MIKE COYLE
BSc, MSc (QUB)
While climate change is a global issue, the local impacts are becoming more apparent. There is a clear need for us to work together to contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Food production is a vital activity upon which we all depend. It is essential that the ambitious business case contained in the ‘Going for Growth’ agri-food strategy is matched with an equal desire for environmental sustainability.

Renewable energy infrastructure has become a highly contentious issue, particularly in rural areas. A significant challenge lies ahead to maximise renewable energy capacity in a way that minimises the intrusiveness of renewable energy infrastructure.

The planning system plays a crucial role in delivering appropriate forms of development to serve the needs of society, while ensuring that our vital land asset does not become exhausted or degraded. The decentralisation of planning functions provides an opportunity for communities to take a more active role in determining the future of their area.

The amalgamation of Government Departments offers an opportunity for a more integrated approach to delivering for the environment, agriculture and rural development. The next Programme for Government should be ambitious in terms of the environmental objectives it seeks to deliver.

In light of these competing priorities and pressures, perhaps the biggest single challenge for Northern Ireland over the next decade and beyond relates to the way in which our diminishing land resource is planned, managed and used. Land is one of Northern Ireland’s most important assets, providing the goods and services upon which human existence depends (including clean water, food, energy, recreation, employment, clean air, aggregates and housing). However, this precious resource is under strain from ever-increasing societal demands and pressures. The implementation of a high level land strategy would contribute to ensuring that the land base in Northern Ireland is maintained and enhanced to provide continued and improved public benefit.

A Land Strategy would not determine actual land use in specific localities; this should be informed locally by communities, groups and individuals. A Land Strategy would not result in any change to the system of land ownership. Rather, the process of developing the Strategy should seek direct input from land owners, managers and other stakeholders. There is a need for greater awareness of, and engagement from, wider civil society in land-related matters. This will promote a broadly based and inclusive approach to policy and decision-making.

The Land Matters Task Force (which includes a range of sectoral organisations), hosted by Northern Ireland Environment Link, has produced a scoping report entitled ‘Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland’ which will be published in May 2015. It provides specific recommendations including suggested vision, rationale and set of principles for a Northern Ireland land strategy. It also examines some of the key topics that a land strategy should consider and a number of key challenges that it should seek to address.

The way we manage our land will be crucial to the future success of Northern Ireland and in ensuring the protection, access and enjoyment, of our rich and diverse environment.

CRAIG McGUICKEN
Chief Executive Officer
NI Environment Link
Two contradictory thoughts come to mind. On the one hand, change is a slow process so things may not be all that different but on the other hand, nothing about the future is certain or can be taken for granted.

Perspective is important to answering any question. In this case we could examine 2025 from the point of view of today, taking into account the opportunities and challenges that we know lie before us including the change in the levels of diversity in our community, our financial problems and our ambivalence about sharing or being separate. Or we could take a longer view and imagine that 2015 and 2025 are both already part of history and come at the question from some point further into the future, freeing our imaginations for a moment from the constraints of here and now.

If we look back to 2005 we can get a general sense of the difference that 10 years can make. We know that time flies of course but we also know that when it comes to change, not every 10 years is the same as another. There are times when history is punctured with dramatic change making a decade almost unrecognisable from the one that preceded or came after it. This sort of dramatic alteration is often the outcome of death, war, disease, or natural disaster. It is more rarely experienced as the outcome of positive social progress. For this reason when it comes to sustaining our peace process with good community relations and equality for all, I believe we need to keep a sense of urgency. The increase in incidents with sectarian or racist elements should also caution us to take nothing for granted.

A child that is born today as I am writing this will be 10 years old in 2025 and their formative years will already be well advanced. The everyday world of these children is already a work in progress for us and we are already part of their history. There is something liberating about the realisation that we are making history. It allows us to see ourselves from the perspective of those that will come after us. So what did we do with that great honour and responsibility? What will rural communities be like in 2025?

If we assume that the financial situation will continue to be difficult, at least for the next few years, what could be done without additional money? For example, could we try to live more aspects of our everyday life in closer relationships with each other, whatever our community background? What if churches, schools, sports and social clubs routinely connect together to include everyone, whatever their belief, in the life of our parishes, villages and towns?

If that was possible, we would no longer need additional resources to try to connect people from different community backgrounds. Our children would be free to go anywhere without fear of attack because it is hard to dehumanise and make an enemy of those you’ve known socially all your life. We might routinely share celebrations with each other without offence being given or taken to make happier memories for future generations. The great thing about this type of change is that it doesn’t need huge additional resources. It needs all of us to make changes in our everyday habits, to open the doors and invite those that we wouldn’t normally into the events that make up our everyday lives. By so doing we could make better use of the resources we already have and create stronger connections between us.

Many people already live their lives this way but if you’re thinking this is rubbish, stop and consider what makes you think that – habit or prejudice? We can be the change that we want to see and let history tell how 2015 to 2025 was the decade of the big social transformation of the places our children and grandchildren will belong to and call home.
Like many European border regions, ours is largely rural and suffers the effects of a double marginalisation – peripheral to developments focused on urban centres, and to wider policies designed in each jurisdiction that neglect the realities of living, studying and working along the border.

This is why cross-border cooperation is needed to overcome problems or exploit unused potentials more easily addressed on a joint basis rather than by approaching them from only one side of the border. On the island of Ireland cross-border cooperation has evolved as a result of two primary policy drivers: the commitment to cross-border cooperation that is part of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and EU cohesion policy which seeks economic, social and territorial cohesion by reducing disparities between the levels of development of regions and countries of the European Union.

EU funding has been crucial to cross-border projects on this island and is often the only source for development crossing jurisdictional boundaries, which is particularly important for rural communities. However, the 2014-2020 funding period has been shaped by a policy of concentration that will be played out in EU-funded cross-border programmes here. This is likely to lead to a smaller number of EU-funded cross-border projects, but of a larger scale involving “key” players, and a trend that will probably endure beyond 2020.

For rural communities there are potential opportunities for engaging in cross-border cooperation for mutual socio-economic benefits. Many of these will come about as local authorities in both jurisdictions shape economic and community development plans and peace action plans. Issues common to border rural communities, such as deficiencies in infrastructure and service provision hampering socio-economic development could be more properly addressed on a cross-border basis. But to seize these opportunities, rural communities have to overcome some fundamental challenges linked to the cross-border identification, expression and resolution of their needs.

Not all problems facing rural communities can be addressed on a cross-border basis; many of them are more appropriately resolved within the one jurisdiction. The challenge is for rural communities to identify where a cross-border approach would bring additional benefits and this requires specific capacity-building. Having identified needs requiring cross-border cooperation, rural communities then face the challenge of having that approach
adopted by the relevant policy-makers on both sides of the border, and that policies are subsequently implemented. This requires sustained engagement between rural communities and also between them and policy-makers in both jurisdictions.

To capitalise on the socio-economic potential of rural communities on both sides of the border, policy-makers have to be alert to situations where the development of rural strategies in each jurisdiction should complement one another. Only by doing so will valuable opportunities for cross-border cooperation be identified that will benefit rural communities. At local government level, the adoption by Councils of the Solidarity Charter for the Economic Revitalisation of the Irish Border Development Corridor being proposed by the Centre for Cross Border Studies and its partners would bring a much needed cross-border focus onto an area that has not always shared in the benefits of wider regional economic development (http://www.crossborder.ie/wp-content/uploads/journal9-2014.pdf). At whatever level, however, policy makers must genuinely engage with those who understand the needs of rural communities: rural communities themselves.

Policy makers given greater responsibility for community development at local government level will need to address the fact that over recent years, many community organisations involved in cross-border work have been directly funded through EU Programmes – notably PEACE – and have not relied exclusively on local authorities. This will change as local authorities gain greater prominence as either direct beneficiaries or intermediaries of PEACE funding, with community organisations seen as partners or enablers of local authority projects. Therefore, good working relationships between local councils and community organisations will have to be revived in order for cross-border work to continue for the benefit of border rural communities and others.

Devolution of greater powers to local authorities should not signify a diminution in commitment to cross-border cooperation and North-South relations on the part of the central governments on this island. Practical and sustainable cross-border solutions to problems experienced by rural border communities will only be facilitated by a self-confident and ambitious engagement with North-South relations by policy makers at the highest levels, providing local authorities and communities in both jurisdictions with the necessary context in which to cooperate for mutual benefit.

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ANTHONY SOARES
Research and Policy Manager
The Centre for Cross Border Studies
The report “Think Rural Community: Think Rural Child” set out an ambitious but achievable vision and implementation plan for the development of innovative, integrated rural early childhood services as a part of a strategy for sustainable rural development. Twenty years on, and while a lot of promising development in rural early childhood care and development has taken place, we are still a long way off from the realisation of that vision and plan.

We still do not have a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland incorporating a focus on rural childcare as part of a comprehensive strategy. However I am not pessimistic – I believe that the political, economic and social environment is right for the development of sustainable rural early childhood services that will support and enhance rural community development over the next 10 years.

We now have an Executive which believes that investing in early years services does make good economic and social investment sense for rural communities. At a time of fiscal pressure, the evidence that investing in high quality rural early childhood services can create a return on investment of between 15%-17% has created a willingness to invest in the development of a robust childcare strategy that will meet the needs of rural communities. The Executive has woken up to the realisation that the growth in early childhood services in rural areas can also be a major contributor to rural employment and can attract inward investment.

Over the next 10 years, the challenge is to see this commitment translated into a robust implementation plan for the roll out of sustainable, innovative solutions in rural communities that could include some of the following actions:

- The development of multifunctional rural childcare centres providing for the care and education needs of families but also able to meet other needs such as sport, recreation, culture, training, information, health and a place for parents and carers to meet and build local rural communities.
- The development of rural childminding networks linked to other forms of rural childcare.
- Mobile outreach services equipped and staffed and able to provide educational and care services in rural communities.
- Childcare service development as part of the farm diversification policy allowing farming families to further develop their contribution to rural community development.
- The utilisation of rural schools to offer preschool and afterschool early childhood and childcare services supported by an appropriate rural school transport policy.
- The creation of a network or consortia of service providers within a geographical area allowing for a number of service providers to meet local need. This model is particularly relevant to Sure Start designated areas.

Financial investment coupled with political will and vision over the next 10 years is critical if we are to realise the possibility of high quality rural childcare services. The current commitment of £12 million for the development of a Childcare Strategy, while most welcome, is inadequate to realise what is needed. There are real opportunities to tap into a range of European funding programmes during the period 2015-2020 and augment what is available from the Northern Ireland Executive. However until our Executive begins to see investment in rural childcare as a key infrastructure priority, we are in danger of wasting another 10 years and in 2025 could still lag seriously behind our European neighbours in terms of having a vibrant rural childcare sector.

SIOBHAN FITZPATRICK
Chief Executive
Early Years
Even the smallest person may change the future

The map of Fermanagh may not have changed much in the last 10 years and yet for someone who grew up here the county is barely recognisable. Communities have changed irreversibly, the cup of sugar that may once have been given when calling in a neighbour’s house is no longer commonplace in the countryside. Doors are locked, alarms are set and gates are bolted shut, perhaps Margaret Thatcher was right when she claimed “there’s no such thing as society.”

And yet people continue to live here and in the most rural areas, the community spirit is alive and well. The ceili houses are still very much the hubs of all things good - mostly tea and digestive biscuits. But these houses are becoming rarer as time runs its course and people grow old. Inevitably a new family moves into that house, a family who do lock their doors, who have to put kids to bed at 8 and be up at dawn to go to work. The world is becoming a busier and busier place, so will this continue over the next 10 years, or has something got to give?

It’s interesting how some perceive time and some see huge differences happening in the next decade while others argue that 10 years is not long enough for any significant change. Basing this on the last 10 years, some say we have stagnated, nothing huge has happened since 2005 to them I say one word with two syllables Wi-Fi!

Technology has leapt forward beyond possible imagination and it is in this area that young people in Fermanagh envisage future growth, exponential growth in some cases. Mobile network coverage, superfast broadband, 4G cinemas are just a few areas with the huge potential for development. Much of the digital technology we have today would have been totally inconceivable a decade ago. The advent of touch screen technology is straight from science fiction movies, bluetooth headsets which today everyone wears to the village shop would have only been invented by M and in the ear of James Bond a few short years ago. We may think we have leapt forward and are at the cutting edge with technology but I believe in 10 years time we will look back and see that our gadgets were positively primitive.

The face of the countryside itself looks set to change with 80% of young people asked stating that they envisage the amalgamation of small neighbouring towns and a slow migration from rural into urban areas, leading to their inevitable expansion. This brings the question of identity into play and with several changes set to happen, young people may have to consider this as never before.

Until now Fermanagh has been the only Council to keep its county borders. Other counties have been divided into several areas but suddenly with the formation of the Super Councils Fermanagh loses this and that impacts on how people view their own identity. Perhaps this will prove to be a positive whereby we can move past green or orange identities and that would certainly be a huge leap forward but it may just be one more label that people struggle to comply with.

Finally, yes, there are less pleasant aspects of change but the uncertainty that the future brings can be a dark place in which to hide things. One of the most recurring concerns of young people in Fermanagh is that dirtiest of words - fracking. The advances of technology, the slow erosion of rural areas brings great advantages at the much ignored cost of the environment. Fermanagh is a county of outstanding natural beauty and it makes this writer a little melancholic to think of its slow and totally stoppable demise.

So Fermanagh is set for change, whether we like it or not but it can be shaped and in that we must all play a part. In conclusion, to borrow from Tolkien, even the smallest person may change the future.

CAOLAN FAUX
Youth Action Peer Educator
Youth Work Apprenticeship Programme Enniskillen
Farmers for Action NI comes under the umbrella of Farmers For Action UK which was originally formed in 2000 by a group of farmers who were involved in the fuel strike but who were becoming increasingly concerned about plummeting farm gate prices due to increasing pressure from corporate retailers.

So where does FFA see the situation of farming families and rural life in general in Northern Ireland in the next 10 years? Increasing pressure on farm gate prices by corporate food retailers, wholesalers and processors has led to farm incomes declining drastically and a crisis in the industry. The more farming families that are pushed out of business, the more factory farms will emerge in suitable locations. Several large chicken farms and a small number of extremely large pig farmers/companies are emerging in Northern Ireland leading to farming becoming even more marginalised especially part time farmers who make up over 70% of the total sector. You could say we are at a crossroads.

In light of this, FFA and nine other farm organisations came together as Fairness for Farmers in Europe (FFE) in 2006 to challenge the importation of sub-standard Brazilian beef, which was then flooding into Europe and wreaking havoc with European beef prices. FFE successfully lodged a complaint to the European Ombudsman in Strasburg in Autumn 2007 and a ban was put in place on sub-standard Brazilian beef in December 2007. As a result, the farmgate price of beef across Europe had risen almost 30% by June 2008. This experience demonstrated to us that the best way to win the farmgate price war was using legal redress. This was the first time any farm organisation had lodged such a complaint in the history of the EU.

In FFA’s view, legislation on farmgate prices stating that Northern Ireland farmers must be paid a minimum of the cost of production plus a margin linked to inflation across the staple foods such as beef, milk, lamb, pork and vegetables is the only measure that will allow us to maintain and enhance rural Northern Ireland as we know it over the next 10 years.

Increasing pressure on farmgate prices by corporate food retailers, wholesalers and processors has led to farm incomes declining drastically and a crisis in the industry.
years. In 2011 FFA submitted a proposal for legislation on farmgate prices to guarantee European farmers a minimum of the cost of production plus a margin linked to inflation for their produce to the EU Commission for Agriculture. We wanted this to be included in the new Common Agricultural Policy commencing in 2015. This could have been funded on an EU wide basis by removing all lowland and arable subsidies but maintaining production linked upland subsidies across the EU resulting in savings of over €100 billion up to 2021. To date this has been looked at by the EU but not taken up and as a result FFA and three other farm organisations (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producer’s Association NIAPA, National Beef Association NBA, and Special Disadvantage Area Support Group SDA Group) working under the heading of Northern Ireland Farm Groups can see no reason why we can’t go ahead similarly in Northern Ireland.

To date the Agriculture Committee has endeavoured to investigate the possibilities with the Stormont legal team. Other relevant committees and Ministers could also take the case forward and we continue to lobby for our proposal as we believe it could create 30,000 jobs within 12 months with a multiple of this following as farmers spending power increases. When farmers have money in their pockets they spend to modernise, upgrade fences, farm yard facilities, machinery etc and create a wealth of employment as they purchase on average from 123 different suppliers, therefore stimulating the economy.

We are confident that our proposal would not lead to over production of food due to the relatively small size of the Northern Ireland agriculture in global terms and with world population set to increase significantly over the next two decades. To conclude FFA believes it’s proposal would put in place a financial safety net for Northern Ireland’s farmers, stimulate the whole economy and force the corporate food businesses to lower their profits thereby ensuring consumers would not pay any more for their food other than normal inflationary increases.

WILLIAM TAYLOR
Northern Ireland Organiser
Farmers For Action
Last year I consulted on a very interesting project. It was designed to help rural and isolated communities take advantage of digital connectivity and new trends in “maker” culture. We explored the possibilities of 3D printers and products like SUGRU (a moldable glue that hardens into rubber - http://sugru.com) in rural communities considering the difficulties of supply and limited access. The core idea was; if you need to buy a new vase, why not just download one?

There are a few maker spaces in Northern Ireland – notably the two government-funded Fab Labs and the community resourced Farset Labs. The problem is these are in Belfast and Derry. There is a growing community of hackers and artists who own their own 3D printer, but it’s still small. They’re using them to prototype new products, produce art pieces and send samples of their work across the world, instantly and digitally.

I believe in the next 10 years, everyone will have a 3D printer. Ten years ago, we were just getting used to digital cameras and we were on the cusp of a smartphone revolution. Ten years before that, colour printers were all the rage. 3D printers will be a lot better than they are now. There are machines that print in colour, machines that print in multiple materials, machines that print in plastics, metals, ceramics, chocolate and bone.

Knowledge is needed to manipulate the files for 3D printing. You also need a reliable internet connection. But more than this; anyone can become a creator and when you’re designing physical goods that can be emailed to a customer you have a potential global market. So we need skills, we need connectivity and we need access to tools. If we have one or two of these, we can’t do anything; we need all three.

But the need for digital connectivity in rural areas goes much further than this. The possibilities for community engagement, telemedicine, remote working, distributed power generation and service delivery are so compelling in the face of rising fuel costs that we should consider them on economic grounds alone.

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When you consider that “digital” is measured in microseconds (the latency for a bit to travel from one location to another) rather than miles per hour, there are other compelling reasons to embrace it fully.

Last year, South West College successfully piloted a virtual academy. They sent their students home and only essential staff were required to attend the college. From this distributed digital campus, they were able to successfully deliver a day of education to their student body. The learning from this pilot is useful for informing the digital needs of rural communities in the future.

Ten years ago we were happy to get broadband that would allow us to download a 3 MB song from iTunes. These days, iTunes is selling 3 GB movie files (1000 times larger) but our broadband hasn’t appreciably increased in bandwidth or latency. The demand for digital access is inexhaustible as movies will be sold in 4K format (ten times larger than the current iTunes high definition format. The definition of broadband hasn’t changed in ten years; the first 4K movie would take 3 days to download on standard Northern Ireland broadband.

By 2015, we should have standardized on 100 megabits per second as the absolute minimum for broadband speeds. As files sizes are now 1000 times larger, internet speeds of 50 times larger seems reasonable. By 2025 we need to be exceeding 1 Gbps (1000 megabits per second) to the home and business premises. This seems high but was already being delivered five years ago in California, South Korea, Singapore, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands and Sweden.

By 2025 we need to be exceeding 1 Gbps (1000 megabits per second) to the home and business premises. This seems high but was already being delivered five years ago in California, South Korea, Singapore, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands and Sweden.

We are already living in a two tier society where some can access “high speed” broadband but many cannot. Without intervention, the digital divide will become even more apparent and its effects will be even more acute. Without high-speed internet access, a doctor will not be able to provide services to patients, a digital creative cannot distribute their work and even our access and consumption of media and online services will be stunted. The BBC home page is 1 Mbyte (which would have taken 2 minutes to download on modem speeds).

As internet access speeds increase, so will the demands for media and as they increase faster in urban areas, rural communities will be left further behind. It will require investment and the formalization of new standards to ensure that rural communities are not further isolated by urban demands.

MATT JOHNSTON
Digital Circle