

A declaration of rural issues
and potential solutions for
consideration by the
political parties leading
up to and beyond
the 2010 General
Election

Rural Manifesto 2010



We believe in a sustainable rural community. Do you...?

We are facing challenging times - socially, economically and environmentally. Rural communities, which make up 35%¹ of the overall population, will not be immune to these challenges. If they are to develop in a sustainable manner, we need to ensure that there is a commitment both to a better understanding of the issues facing rural areas and a commitment to their resolution at local and central government level.

This manifesto sets out a number of priorities which Rural Community Network and its members believe are critical to sustaining rural communities in Northern Ireland. In this document, RCN details what we would like all the political parties to commit to and what we are prepared to do as citizens and groups living and working across rural Northern Ireland.

Whilst this manifesto is timed to coincide with the 2010 Westminster elections, it is set out in such a way to make it relevant to the local Assembly elections the following year and we encourage rural dwellers to use it as a basis for challenging those standing for election as they stand on your doorstep requesting your support.

RCN thanks all the contributors to the manifesto with very special thanks to our members who took the time to read the draft manifesto, make critical responses and finally to endorse it.

The manifesto is just a part of the journey to raise awareness, acknowledgement and support from our elected representatives for the sustainability of our rural communities. They simply seek our votes. What the rural citizen simply seeks in return is their commitment to addressing the many real issues that cause disadvantage, inequality and poverty within a rural context.

Michael Hughes
Chief Executive Officer

¹ 2001 Census

1 Rural White Paper

The current Programme for Government contains a commitment to develop a Rural White Paper which would set out the Government's focused and meaningful proposals to support a sustainable rural community in Northern Ireland. A proposal by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle Gildernew, to lead on the development of a Rural White Paper was approved by the Executive on 22 April 2008. Subsequently, a Rural White Paper Independent Stakeholder Group was established by DARD to develop draft recommendations which were submitted to the Minister on 27 January 2010. DARD will be taking these proposals and engaging directly with government departments and local government to develop specific and measurable commitments over the next few months. A formal consultation process is scheduled to run in the autumn on these commitments with proposals signed off by the Assembly and Executive by early 2011.

What we ask...

We ask political parties to commit to make the Rural White Paper work for rural communities and ensure that there is a measurable, resourced and meaningful action plan that Departments are held to account for by Departmental Committees, the Assembly and the Executive.

What we commit to...

We commit to take the time and effort to get involved in consultations with regard to the Rural White Paper over 2010. We also commit to offer considered views and practical suggestions which are fully representative of the rural community, recognising the additional barriers faced by those living in rural communities.

2 Rural Proofing

Rural proofing is a process which 'ensures that all relevant policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas because of the particular characteristics of rural areas and where necessary, what policy adjustments might be made to reflect rural needs and in particular to ensure that as far as is possible, public services are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community'.

Rural proofing should be an underlying part of the policy formation cycle, with clear identification of evidence used, decisions made and monitoring of the impact of the various policies. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), however, would recognise that rural proofing has not been as successful as desired. For many in central and local government, the use of a rural proofing checklist has been seen as little more than a tick box exercise with the entire process lacking feedback and scrutiny. As a result, DARD has published proposals to enhance rural proofing (www.dardni.gov.uk/rural_champion_delivery_proposals.pdf).

What we ask...

We ask political parties to commit to developing a legislative basis for rural proofing in the next Programme for Government. We also ask the DOE and political parties to ensure that there are effective rural proofing mechanisms linked to the Review of Public Administration that will address the threat of rural communities being swallowed up and dominated by urban centres within the proposed new local government structures.

What we commit to...

We commit to ensure that rural citizens and rural groups support each other to speak with confidence and with evidence when engaging with local and central government, giving voice to those who are under represented.

3 Agriculture

Agriculture has been and continues to be rural Northern Ireland's most sustainable indigenous industry with an estimated farm labour force of nearly 50,000. As well as being a major contributor to employment, agricultural production is also a significant contributor to the Northern Ireland economy in terms of production for both the home and export markets. However like all local industries, agriculture has not been immune to wider external influences. Increased regulation around food production, environmental protection and accountability have been exacerbated by the global recession, the importation of cheap foreign goods and the ever growing number of people throughout Northern Ireland that are experiencing a reduction in disposable income resulting in a change of purchasing decisions.



Such forces, many of which have been outside the control of our local food producers, have brought into sharp focus critical issues such as farm sustainability, the drift away from farming of many young people with the associated skills and knowledge, all of which, if not corrected, will do untold irreversible damage to this important driver for economic development. Whilst the increased demands on the agricultural industry around food production are seen by many as a deterrent for engaging in food production, the creation of renewable energy and the need for access for recreation and better health provide opportunities for the farming community to engage in developing a more diverse rural economy which offers greater alternatives as to how one of our greatest assets is used.

What we ask...

We ask political parties to recognise the importance of agriculture to the future economic and healthy wellbeing of Northern Ireland and to put in place legislation which ensures fair and affordable prices for high grade, traceable and healthy food.

We ask that the farming community is given sufficient support and encouragement in exploring alternative uses of land to enhance the sustainability of rural communities and contribute to energy production and increased food security.

We also ask that there is a sufficient investment in both time and expertise to enable a full and well informed debate across the rural community on the potential impacts of CAP (Common Agriculture Policy) reform within NI.

What we commit to...

We commit to actively explore opportunities to source and purchase locally produced agricultural goods.

We also commit to actively support more effective working relationships and shared understandings between the farming sector and other rural stakeholders.

4

Tackling Inequality and Social Exclusion

Although social exclusion and poverty in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland have many common features, there are a number of distinct rural characteristics including:

- Higher proportion of population in older age bracket (over 65)
- Lower benefit uptake levels
- Lower income
- Greater difficulty in accessing information and advice through word of mouth, social networks and signposting services
- Personal reluctance to admit the existence of poverty and disadvantage – the notion of deprivation carries a stigma at odds with a culture of self-reliance and ‘making do’
- Limited access to employment opportunities and childcare facilities
- Falling farm incomes
- The effects of centralisation and rationalisation of services resulting in lower access to services and poorer quality of provision to, for example, health, education, transport, post offices and shops
- Fuel poverty due to higher dependence on personal transport and higher heating costs
- Higher rate of unfit housing
- Greater isolation and invisibility of vulnerable groups such as lone parents, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, gay, lesbian and transgender people
- Greater isolation of rural women as victims of domestic violence and abuse
- Poor transport infrastructure

Greater invisibility coupled with a culture of self-reliance within rural areas means that tackling rural poverty and exclusion will require both a commitment and understanding at policy level with a ‘bottom up’ approach that allows people in poverty to take control of their situation and connect with networks, information and material support to generate their own solutions. The sustainability and future of rural communities will be dependent on the degree to which rural poverty and exclusion are understood and taken seriously. An increasingly unequal

rural society will undermine any possibility of its future. A central challenge is making visible those who are invisible without stigmatising, thereby making it impossible to build the critical relationship between those who are excluded with the 'non-poor' in rural communities. That dimension of inter-dependency is vital if rural exclusion is to be seriously addressed and wider rural sustainability secured.

What we ask...

We ask that the next review of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, post the next census, leads to a change in the weighting to the Access to Services domain to better capture rural poverty. In addition we ask for a more measured and considered use of the Multiple Deprivation Measure, which recognises the limitations of the measure, particularly in decisions relating to the targeting of Government funding and support.

We ask that a future Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland includes socio-economic rights and that 'Lifetime Opportunities', the Government's anti poverty and social inclusion strategy, is fully implemented with agreed actions and targets for every Government department.

We also ask that the recommendations made in the WCRP Report "Barriers to Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities" (2009) are implemented.

What we commit to...

We commit to ensure that our work as volunteers and paid professionals focuses on the rights and voices of those who are most marginalised in our communities.



5

Building a Shared Future

People in rural areas often live and work closely together and people are rightly proud of the occasions when neighbours help each other out regardless of community background or tradition. But very often, these same people will worship and socialise in different ways, and watch different sports. Often their children may be educated apart or actively participate in youth clubs and youth initiatives that develop the same personal skills but do so separately. In reality, for many people in rural communities the daily experience is of living within the same space but not being able or willing to proactively share it.

There is no question that in a rural context, issues of attachment to area, locality and, in some cases, the very land itself, are emotive. The cost of such division, both financially in terms of duplication of services and to society, continues to have detrimental consequences to the sustainability of rural communities both now and in the future. These costs are also borne by black and minority ethnic communities who also face distinct issues due to often increased isolation, visibility and distance from sources of support, information and services.

What we ask...

We ask that the Executive brings forward to implementation a strategic programme aimed at building a better and shared society which recognises the distinct issues around sectarianism and racism in rural areas and which obligates both government departments and local government to actively deliver meaningful actions on the ground to address these issues. Given that UNSC Resolution 1325 emphasises the distinct position of women in conflict and post conflict situations and calls on member states to act in several areas, including the promotion of women in decision making institutions, we would encourage relevant government departments to ensure that this obligation is met.

What we commit to...

We commit to actively work to ensure we are building shared communities where all people with our differences of nationality, politics, religion and community background feel safe, welcome and are encouraged and supported to make a positive contribution to the community.

6 Public Sector Jobs

In 2008, Sir George Bain concluded in the Bain Review on the Location of Public Sector Jobs that at least 5,000 jobs should be relocated from Belfast to places like Derry/Londonderry and Newry. Rural Community Network was therefore disappointed with the indication in October 2009 from the Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, that the recommendations from the Review could be shelved due to proposed costs of around £40m in relocating these jobs. In our original response to the Review, Rural Community Network fully supported the three core objectives of a relocation policy: to improve the accessibility of public services; to assist areas with particular social and economic needs; and to ensure balanced regional development.

RCN believes that the shelving of this Review by the Northern Ireland Executive is shortsighted. Whilst we recognise that Northern Ireland's future does not lie solely with public sector employment, public sector jobs provide an important springboard for the community and voluntary sector as well as the private sector in building a successful rural economy and sustainable community. For many living in rural communities, future lifestyle and employment opportunities will be shaped by the cost of oil and fuel. Whilst the rise in the cost of oil hits everyone, the impact has been, and will continue to be, particularly disproportionate for rural dwellers due to greater transport needs. If prices remain high, this will shape people's employment and housing choices. It will also determine how public services will be delivered and where.

In these difficult economic times, the contribution volunteers make across all facets of life becomes even more critical. The public sector as a major employer in Northern Ireland needs to recognise and actively support this contribution set against the challenges of centralisation.

What we ask...

We ask the Executive to consider the Bain Review recommendations and develop a realistic action plan committing Ministers to develop appropriate decentralisation proposals for their Departments. We also ask for two days paid leave each year across the public sector to carry out volunteering roles.

What we commit to...

We commit to highlight the importance of decentralisation as a pump primer for the economy of regional towns and their rural hinterlands. We also commit to facilitating and supporting paid staff to take two days paid leave to volunteer within their communities.

7

Transport and Road Safety

Rural transport is often a highly charged issue in many rural areas, whether it is about road safety and the numbers killed or injured on rural roads, the impact of rising fuel costs, ungritted roads, poor quality roads, or the lack of public transport.

Mobility is an essential requirement in modern life. However, the issues and challenges for those rural dwellers that own or have access to a car are very different to the 20.5% of rural dwellers that do not. If you own a car, rural transport challenges are around keeping mobile which might include the cost of running a car, the cost of fuel and safety on the roads. If you do not own a car, rural transport is about how to access employment and/or vital and often disappearing services. The problems of the immobile socially excluded should not be analysed in isolation from the mobile included as there is often a vicious cycle in operation across rural communities between increased car ownership, greater commuting distances and a decline in services for those who do not have access to a car, such as those on a low income, young people and older people.

If transport is to contribute to sustainable and balanced regional development in Northern Ireland, then it will be necessary to improve the sustainability of rural transport by reducing the amount of individual vehicle kilometres driven while improving mobility and accessibility to services. Viable economic and social activities must be located within rural communities, challenging the tendency towards centralisation, and affordable, appropriate and safe transport must be provided for those activities and services that are located elsewhere.

What we ask...

We ask for the development of a Sustainable Rural Transport Policy which obliges government departments to work together and which invests in and is shaped by rural citizens and communities.

We ask that any new fiscal measures introduced to reduce carbon emissions must be rigorously and transparently rural proofed. For example, a carbon tax would be a regressive tax for rural dwellers in that rural dwellers would generally be more affected than urban dwellers due to the necessity for higher car usage.

We ask for the development of a Rural Road Safety strategy with appropriate support and education to encourage people to take less car journeys when and where relevant.

We also ask that the local transport planning process outlined within the recent proposals for the reform of public transport is implemented and appropriately resourced to be effective.

What we commit to...

We commit, wherever possible, to make increased use of public transport, cycling and walking, in so doing contributing to health and more sustainable forms of transport.

8 Rural Childcare

The report by the Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group (2008) established by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development confirmed that rural areas do face particular and distinct challenges in relation to the delivery of and access to rural childcare services. These include:

- Issues of accessibility due to lack of public transportation, mobility issue (car access) and varying work patterns and on farm responsibilities
- Scattered population contributing to the likelihood of increased costs in service provision
- Limited infrastructure, buildings and inadequate IT reducing opportunities for training, access to information and networking
- Changing family structures and employment patterns both off farm and outside rural areas (often longer commuting patterns)
- Disadvantage is often hidden - unlike many in urban areas, the more disadvantaged families in rural areas live amongst those better off
- Lack of affordable childcare is the biggest barrier to rural women's engagement in education, training, work, and public and political life

It is critical that we have a NI Childcare Strategy which is realistic, costed and actionable and that rural distinctiveness is recognised and addressed.

What we ask...

We ask for a Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy that is resourced and meaningful and clearly outlines the distinctive issues in rural areas and how these will be addressed building on the experiences of DARD's Rural Childcare Programme.

What we commit to...

We commit to actively participate in and contribute to local childcare planning processes and support local and regional organisations in their work to lobby for affordable accessible childcare.



9 Health²

Most people who live in rural areas experience a high quality of life. On average they live longer, have better physical and mental health and enjoy healthier lifestyles. Beneath these averages, however, is a more complex picture of poverty and disadvantage, which is largely under-reported and overlooked. The poorest and most disadvantaged rural residents have much poorer health outcomes and experience consistently lower levels of physical and mental health. Targeting and addressing these problems is difficult given that much rural deprivation is often not captured. This applies in particular to those who are very isolated, people with long-term limiting health conditions, those who are carers (a higher proportion of whom are women), people on low incomes or social benefits, elderly people, lone parents (a higher proportion of which are women) and people without access to private transport.

At the same time, rural areas present distinct delivery challenges for service providers, which need to be understood and overcome.

- *Ageing* - An ageing rural population has significant implications for the provision of both health and social care, which are in general, more costly and more difficult to deliver in rural areas.
- *Access to services* – unless accessibility at a very local level is specifically factored into the planning, commissioning and monitoring of preventative services, such services are usually concentrated in a small number of locations.
- *Cost* - The current approach to funding healthcare does not reflect the additional cost of providing healthcare services in rural areas, relating to time and distance. Nor does the formula reflect the healthcare needs of the dramatically ageing demographic profile of rural areas. Studies confirm that healthcare services generally cost more to provide in rural areas. In Scotland, it has been calculated that additional costs of between 7.5% and 10% are required to deliver health services to rural populations. In England, Commission for Rural Communities research indicates that one rural Primary Care Trust will spend 5% of its salary costs on travel.

² Evidence taken from research conducted by the Commission for Rural Communities – www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Rural dwellers recognise that it is unsustainable to have an acute hospital in every community, however they do have a right to expect quality level of service and there needs to be clear thinking with regard to what is best delivered locally and what needs to be delivered centrally.



What we ask...

We ask for equivalence of access and provision for rural dwellers. There is an obligation on those who are planning and delivering health and social care services to work with rural citizens and communities to explore creative solutions to providing local and/or accessible services.

There needs to be an obligatory exchange of expertise and experience to maintain adequate and planned staff resources in rural areas to ensure that best practice is maintained and updated in all health service locations.

What we commit to...

We commit to look out for each other as neighbours and provide support to those who need care and who provide care within rural communities.

10 Housing

Rural housing policy in Northern Ireland is contested as was evidenced during PPS14 and PPS21 with the debate shaped at one end by a pro-development perspective and, at the other, by casting rural living as essentially unsustainable due to its dependency on the car and its impact on the rural landscape. Mark Scott and Michael Murray argue in their paper on 'Housing Rural Communities: Connecting Rural Dwellings to Rural Development in Ireland' that rural housing policy has historically been driven by top down land use and environmental objectives with a failure to take into consideration social-economic goals and the role of housing in rural regeneration and sustainability. They say '*This includes housing affordability, addressing local needs and access to housing, and maintaining the local service base for the existing rural community*'³.

Matthew Taylor, in the review he conducted in England on the planning system and rural sustainability, highlighted that among the many different scenarios facing rural communities, a simple one stands out '*Many of the people who work in the countryside increasingly cannot afford to live there, while the people who can afford to live there increasingly do not work there.*'⁴ This scenario is as relevant to rural Northern Ireland where the economic, social and environmental sustainability of rural communities will be shaped by the availability of affordable, quality housing.

Poverty and social exclusion in a rural context is often less visible than in an urban context and it is critical that resources are used effectively to provide supported housing for a range of groups, among them people with learning disabilities, victims of domestic violence, carers, people with disabilities, young and vulnerable people, and people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse.

³ Housing Rural Communities: Connecting Rural Dwellings to Rural Development in Ireland, Scott M., Murray M., Housing Studies, Volume 24, Issue 6, November 2009, pp 755-774

⁴ Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review -<http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planning/planningpolicyimplementation/reformplanningsystem/matthewtaylorreview> (2008)

What we ask...

We ask for a single Housing and Communities Strategy as recommended by the Commission on the Future for Housing in NI which contains an in-depth analysis of the specific context to rural housing and wider rural regeneration followed by clear recommendations over the short, medium and long term. This single Housing and Communities Strategy should also be tied in with the Regional Development Strategy and should influence the ongoing review of the RDS.



We ask that a target for rural social housing provision is set and focused on. We also ask that specific funding for rural social housing delivery is identified (including review of costs of provision in rural areas).

We ask that the development of Community Land Trusts model is further explored as a potential mechanism for the provision of community owned affordable housing.

We also ask that there is adequate and appropriate provision in rural communities to provide emergency housing for people facing homelessness due to such factors as domestic violence, loss of income or relationship breakdown.

What we commit to...

We commit to working with relevant agencies in identifying demand for affordable housing in rural areas and assisting in meeting this demand through statutory/community asset acquisition and management.

11 Planning

RCN welcomed the Planning Service's consultation on Planning Reform. There were major proposals to put planning back at the heart of local democracy and the task of building confidence and trust in the new system cannot be underestimated. However, we noted that there is immense cynicism with regard to whether participation in consultation processes makes any impact on the final decisions taken. This is particularly true for many rural citizens and communities in light of the deep mistrust generated by the PPS14 and PPS21 debacles.

From RCN's perspective, reform is needed to ensure that we have a modern, efficient and effective planning system that supports *'An attractive and prosperous rural area, based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside, in order to sustain a strong and vibrant rural community contributing to the overall wellbeing of the region as a whole.'*

In our response to the Planning Reform consultation, we stated that we would have welcomed a stronger and clearer vision with regard to the purpose of planning which focuses on creating communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live. We outlined some core principles in planning which would be applicable to all who participate in the planning process - citizens, elected representatives, planners, business and developers. These might include, for example, that planning process participants should⁵:

- Ensure that the planning process exists to serve the public interest
- Recognise the rights of citizens to participate in planning decisions
- Strive to give citizens (including those who lack formal organisation and influence) full, clear and accurate information on planning issues and the opportunity to have a meaningful role in the development of plans and programmes
- Strive to expand choice and opportunity for all persons in such a manner which facilitates their involvement in the development of plans that might impact on their quality of life choices, recognising a special responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups and persons
- Assist in the clarification of community goals, objectives and policies in plan-making
 - Ensure that reports, records and any other non-confidential information which is, or will be, available to decision makers is made available to the public in a convenient format and sufficiently in advance of any decision

⁵ Adapted from American Planning Association

- Strive to protect the integrity of the natural environment and the heritage of the built environment

We also stated that all organisations and bodies in the Planning System should develop the Statement of Community Involvement and include specific reference as to how marginalised groups will be engaged with, including those marginalised by geography. These standards would also apply to pre-application consultation processes for major and regional applications. They should also apply to the monitoring and review of local development plans and any other review and monitoring processes. The focus should be more on effective planning decisions as opposed to only efficient ones.

What we ask...

We ask that all organisations and bodies in the Planning System should develop the Statement of Community Involvement and include specific reference as to how marginalised groups will be engaged with including those marginalised by geography.

We ask that as part of the Planning Reform proposals, all planning applications should be subjected to a rigorous and transparent consultation process which takes account of the potential social as well as economic and environmental implications relating to the proposal.

We also ask DSD to use secondary legislation to widen the 'permitted objects' that registered Housing Associations can be involved in with regard to the social housing new build programme. Such a move would enable them to build houses for outright sale which would allow greater tenure mixing in rural areas.

There is a need for a limited third party right of appeal [TPRA] within the planning process. The right to question is a fundamental safeguard against abusive practices. Such a provision would help to build confidence in the planning system, and act as a 'back-loading' mechanism in the event of an ineffective public engagement process and pre-application consultation.

We ask parties to ensure the right to a public hearing is secured and that a statutory link is established between the development planning process and community planning.

What we commit to...

We commit to ensuring we develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to actively participate in the area and community planning processes.

12 Education

Rural Community Network has conducted research over the years highlighting the situation of small rural schools. In work that we compiled with Professor Tony Gallagher, for example, there was an acknowledgement that, at times, the closure of a small rural school needs to be considered in the context of providing the best educational and societal education for children. However there was also within this research, a consistent recommendation that Northern Ireland needs a policy for sustaining rural schools and that local communities need to be at the heart of the decision making process. Local rural schools are more than bricks and mortar; they work at many different levels and in many areas are the heart of the community.



Away from the classroom environment, community education in Northern Ireland provides accessible learning at a number of different and important levels - geographically, financially and psychologically. The wider society benefits include: providing the skills base to support local community development; providing opportunities for dialogue and learning from others for those who wish to build good relations and a diverse and fair society; and opportunities for cross generational learning.

In its Further Education Means Business paper published in 2004, the Department for Education and Learning recognised that 'Further education should be at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic development, enhance social cohesion, and advance the individual's skills and learning.'

The standard in attainment of numeracy and literacy skills remains stubbornly low in NI with estimates of a quarter of the adult population having no formal qualifications. As well as impacting on economic competitiveness, this also has a huge negative effect on individual wellbeing and participation in wider society and community life. Evidence has shown that educational disadvantage tends to be passed down through families. Community based education has been vital to vulnerable rural people where distances to FE colleges are long and poor public transport prevents people from accessing FE colleges. The move away from

community based provision by the FE colleges is, in our view, a retrograde step that will make it much more difficult for vulnerable rural people to access a second chance at education.

What we ask...

We ask that a presumption against the closure of rural schools is introduced, not to prevent any or all such closures in future, but to seek to ensure that a closure decision is only taken as a last resort and not until all the alternatives have been explored and the potential impact on the community fully considered.

We ask that decisions about the future of any school should not be made by one governing body in isolation and should be part of an area based approach involving key rural stakeholders.

DEL policy/strategy needs to better recognise, acknowledge and actively support the role of community based learning/education providers in addition to the role of the six FE Colleges.

Government should support FE colleges in providing adult and continuing education which is not solely focused on improving employment prospects.

We ask for commitment to improving access to existing formal educational facilities and the resources they possess including primary schools within rural areas for the purposes of enhancing or increasing community education.

What we commit to...

We commit to placing the quality of education for our children first.

We also commit to actively support communities to get involved in identifying both the educational needs within their communities and the most appropriate and sustainable means to meet these needs.

13 Renewable Energy

Environmental protection, the continued depletion of fossil fuels and other resources and the solutions needed to tackle these issues present both huge challenges and potential opportunities for rural communities. The importance of agriculture to the local economy and the maintenance of the environment which enables farming to remain viable will become even more important as unstable fuel costs in the future will drive up the cost of importing food.

RCN endorses the concept of the Green New Deal and believes that if implemented it can make a serious contribution to meeting the challenges facing rural communities. The Green New Deal for Northern Ireland is a joined up approach to the 'triple crunch' of recession, rising energy prices and climate change¹.

The proposal is a simple one: investing in an ambitious programme to cut consumption of fossil fuels can create thousands of new jobs, help secure our energy supply and build a competitive low-carbon economy. Around 10% of Northern Ireland's income is spent on importing fossil fuels on which we are 99% dependent for our energy. Facing a future of rising energy prices, we risk serious economic and social failure unless we act swiftly to reduce that dependence.

The Green New Deal vision is to:

- **Refurbish tens of thousands of existing homes** each year with full insulation and renewable energy, including the 137,000 homes that fail to meet the Decent Homes Standard and thus making significant inroads into fuel poverty.
- **Transform the energy performance of public and commercial buildings** through energy efficiency measures and making 'every building a power station'.
- **'Decarbonise', regionalise and localise the supplies of both electricity and heat** through large-scale renewables, micro-generation and using fossil fuels more efficiently.

- **Employ a ‘carbon army’ of high- and lower-skilled workers** to implement this vast systematic reconstruction programme creating around 24,000 new jobs.
- **Transform our transport system** to be fit for purpose in the coming era of high oil and carbon prices by providing a real public transport choice for everyone.
- **Create thousands of ‘green collar’ jobs** in the £3,000 billion world market for Low Carbon Environmental Goods and Services.
- **Develop a wide-ranging package of financial innovations and incentives** to assemble and leverage the very large sums needed to implement such a programme, based on collaboration and partnership between the public sector, the private sector, other stakeholders and the public.

The Green New Deal Group is a cross-sectoral initiative led by the Confederation of British Industry, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, Ulster Farmers’ Union, Institute of Directors and the Sustainable Development Commission.

For further details, visit <http://www.sdcommission.org.uk/publications/downloads/Green%20New%20Deal%20for%20NI%205%201%2014%20Oct%2009.doc>

What we ask...

We ask that the Green New Deal is effectively rural proofed to ensure that its proposed actions impact equitably across the region and take into account how proposed policies can have unintended consequences in rural communities.

What we commit to...

We commit to engaging with the Green New Deal steering group to offer a rural community perspective on their proposals.

Post Offices- RCN was actively involved in 2008 in supporting a number of rural communities over the eight week consultation programme by the Post Office in its plans for post office closure and the development of outreach services. It would be fair to say that many of the groups we spoke to were frustrated by both the rationale for the proposed changes to their local post offices as well as the difficulty in accessing the information that had informed the decisions made. These experiences were well documented in the Summer 2008 edition of Network News. With the closure of the consultation and appeal process, the net result has been the closure of 38 post office branches with a further 54 branches having been replaced by an outreach service.

RCN's primary concern, and the one conveyed to us by many of our members, is to ensure that there is a viable and accessible rural postal service for the years ahead. With 2011 being the current proposed cut off for the government's £150 million per year subsidy to the post office, now is the time to be exploring how the remaining network and the services it provides are working as well as what else can be done to secure and enhance what already exists.

Broadband - We welcome DARD's £1.5 million contribution to the £50 million investment in Next Generation Broadband across Northern Ireland and the commitment to improving broadband coverage and speed in rural areas by 2011. Access to high speed high quality broadband services is critical in supporting rural businesses to maintain their competitiveness, improve access to information and services for rural citizens, particularly for those who do not have access to a car, and contribute to education and learning of all. We hope that this investment will be sustained over the long term ensuring equivalence of access across urban and rural communities.

What we ask...

We ask for an acceptance that high class communication and connectivity is a basic entitlement for rural communities ensuring that rural communities have the potential to be linked into local, regional and global services enhancing social capital and economic competitiveness.

We also ask for a commitment to actively explore how a sustainable rural post office network can best be secured post 2011. This should include identifying the specific central and local government services/functions that could be performed by local post offices.

What we commit to...

We commit to play a full part in the identification of broadband 'not-spots' and issues arising from changes to post office coverage. We will also explore with communication service providers locally relevant solutions to connectivity issues. We also commit to use our local post offices.

15

Next Programme for Government and Budget

Departments are already thinking about priorities and resources with regard to the next Programme for Government in 2011. There are real concerns for many within rural areas that the current economic context of efficiency savings and cutbacks will result in the increasing centralisation of services and jobs. Whilst rural areas should not be privileged, we are asking that there is equity between rural and urban areas and that this core principle is stated and evidenced in the next Programme for Government and Budget.

What we ask...

We ask that an effective, transparent and well-evidenced rural proofing process of the next Programme for Government and Budget is undertaken to ensure balanced and sustainable regional development.

Pending the implementation of an effective rural proofing process, we ask for a statement signalling a commitment to equity of resources between rural and urban areas in the next Programme for Government and Budget.

What we commit to...

We recognise that we are entering financially difficult times and that rural citizens and communities will have to be realistic with regard to available funding and participate actively in finding creative solutions to addressing these challenges.





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SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

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