

# Network

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**News**  
[www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org](http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org) - Celebrating 25 Years

*Celebrating  
25 Years*



Rural Community Network  
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

# Chairperson's Foreword

**T**o be celebrating 25 years is a significant milestone for any organisation. It has been a privilege to have been involved in RCN for over half of this time during which we have seen many changes, celebrated many successes and faced many challenges. Throughout this time RCN has consistently demonstrated at the core of its work a commitment to rural people, rural communities and rural issues. As someone living in a rural community this is why I initially became involved as a Board member and it is RCN's ongoing commitment to rural that keeps me involved.

We are facing challenging and uncertain times socially environmentally and economically. Rural communities, which make up 35% of the overall population of NI, will not be immune to these challenges. If they are to develop and thrive we need to ensure there is a commitment within government to better understand the particular challenges facing rural areas and a commitment to finding resolutions to these challenges at both a local and central government level.

Over the past 25 years RCN has worked tirelessly to grow and develop the capacity of local groups to find local solutions to local issues through working alongside these groups to develop their understanding of policy contexts, their capacity to respond to adverse impacts of disinvestment, service withdrawal and challenging financial circumstances and we have worked to articulate their voice and their viewpoints right across government.

RCN is grounded in the groups that it works alongside. It is managed and owned by those groups. Its strategic plan places at its core an ambition to support, develop and grow local groups in order that we are in a position to make informed responses to government policy making and take informed decisions about the direction of travel in our lobbying and campaign work. Our connection with groups on the ground helps us as, an agency, to provide evidence of the impact of policies on rural communities and helps us to articulate the views of rural groups to policy makers.

We want to thank all of those groups, individuals and organisations who have shaped and supported the work of RCN over the years. You have made it the thriving, passionate and ambitious agency that it currently is. In these uncertain times we continue to commit to working tirelessly to articulate the needs of rural dwellers, particularly those who are most marginalized, to those who both make and influence policy.

In my time as a Board member with RCN I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with many highly skilled and talented people. I have learned so much from their knowledge and experience of rural issues. For me, many of my best experiences with RCN have centred around having opportunities to visit organisations working in their own communities. Seeing first-hand how rural groups, most of whom are volunteers, work to bring real changes to their communities has been truly inspiring.

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**PAUL DINSMORE**  
Chairperson RCN

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# Unlocking the Potential

**I** have spent almost 20 years working in rural development; firstly when I managed Oakleaf Rural Support Network, then as an RCN Board member, an RCN employee and now Director. During that time I have witnessed first-hand the drive, ambition and passion of this organisation, its staff, its membership and its board in lobbying policy makers and investors to view rural areas as a valued asset rather than a challenge to be overcome.

Improving the lives of those living and working in rural communities has been a key function of Rural Community Network since its inception 25 years ago. All through those years the organisation has had held tight to a vision which would ensure vibrant, sustainable rural communities by working alongside our member groups to support their efforts to achieve their potential in areas of economic, social and cultural development. In its 25 year history this organisation has worked alongside a wide variety of stakeholders, from local groups and key agencies in the community and voluntary sector to government departments and Ministers, to deliver policy changes, pilot programmes, financial investment, research and support services. This special edition of Network News highlights some of the key successes that RCN has delivered in its lifetime and reflects on our journey so far.

As we look to the future, Rural Areas will be faced with many challenges, including

social isolation, service withdrawal, unemployment and connectivity to name a few. The prospect of Brexit adds a further set of complications to rural communities and in particular our rural border communities. We know that the 'one size fits all' approach to rural development will not work as rural areas have different needs and require different solutions. Having worked alongside our strong, supported and empowered communities for the past 25 years we know from experience that many of these issues can and will be addressed with local innovation and creativity.

Rural Community Network believes that the most important resource in any rural community is its people and through the development and support services we offer, along with our partner organisations, we aim to capitalise on the talent, creativity and energy of rural people to maximise their assets and overcome barriers to their development. Rural people, across Northern Ireland have it

within their gift to unlock the potential of their areas to deliver opportunities for local employment, local services, local facilities and social support. RCN will continue to support them in their endeavours.

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**KATE CLIFFORD**  
Director

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# NICVA

**H**aving worked together for so many years, it was great to finally cement the relationship between the two organisations by joining in partnership to deliver the generic strand of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP) funded jointly by then Department for Social Development and Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (now Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and Department for Communities).

The joint policy statement produced in 2012 demonstrated government's commitment to working with and supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector to help secure the delivery of efficient and effective public services, particularly to vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. The vision for the programme was:

"That voluntary and community sector organisations across Northern Ireland (urban and rural) are provided with the key generic infrastructure support which allows them to function effectively to deliver government objectives and maximise the impact of the work they do".

NICVA and RCN alongside CO3 and CENI developed a programme of work to help ensure that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) operating in Northern Ireland is supported to operate in an effective way. This support, on which the VCS depends, includes a combination of capacity, skills, physical resources and structures which help those organisations function appropriately to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

NICVA and RCN have worked hard together since 2012 to deliver this support ensuring the needs of organisations, urban and rural across NI are met in the most

effective way. We have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship built on trust and appreciation for each organisations' expertise. We are delighted that this relationship has continued to develop and we are now providing joint support for faith based community organisations.

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**UNA MCKERNAN**  
Deputy Chief Executive  
NICVA

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# Twenty Years a Growing

**T**here's a well-worn Irish description of the life-cycle that starts "Fiche bliain ag fás/Twenty years a-growing ... Fiche bliain faoi bhláth/Twenty years in blossom".

On that basis, we are, frighteningly for some of us, now half-way through the 'in blossom' period of structured rural development here. Over those three decades the rural development space has become cluttered, confusing and, too often, frustrating for the people, communities and groups actually living in and making up rural NI. But given that before the late 1980s happy arrival on the scene of the 'Three Wise Men' of the then Department of Agriculture, Bill Hodges (RIP), Felix Dillon and Gerry McWhinney, the rural development space was more of a desert, many of us would prefer the bit of clutter any day.

Plenty of good things have happened in the years since but there's still a lot to do. As a rule-of-thumb for me our local Councils provide very good civic governance and service delivery for rural areas but the performance of too many things organized for us at the regional level here is correspondingly poor.

Planning, from the PSRNI 'Green Book' through to PPS 14 and 21, has been a

consistent disappointment (though the new Mid-Ulster Council's Local Development Plan 2030 Preferred Options Paper includes a great deal of thinking that's inspiring refreshing for those of us lucky enough to live in Mid-Ulster).

Rural-related health care has been a one-way street of accelerated retraction. Too many core infrastructure projects earmarked for rural areas (such as the Police College and the A5 and A6 roads) get beset by problems. Important small Schools disappear and it continues to be impossible to get the Schools estate opened up for other uses.

Despite their centrality to daily personal, community and economic life, broadband and mobile phone coverage are either absent or unacceptably poor in too many rural areas.

The development of Sprucefield, a place nicely accessible to many rural people, seems stymied because of a reluctance to accept that 'traditional' city centres aren't and won't ever again be what they once were.

But for all that, for me rural life here is better than it ever was. Most populations are growing, after more or less a century-and-a-half of grinding decline from the Great Famine. Modern travel means

migration to work elsewhere doesn't require the cruel, long separations that it used to bring. New, vigorous people from Europe are now central to many of our local economies. Local entrepreneurialism just won't lie down. And since the first Rural Development Programmes arrived Tyrone have won 13 All-Irelands compared to just three before that!

To those who helped make those many good things happen for us ... Thank You! And that includes RCN.

To finish where we started. That Irish take on the life-cycle finishes out "Fiche bliain ag cromadh/Twenty years declining, Fiche bliain gur cuma ann nó as/Twenty years when it doesn't matter if you're there or not"! It's clearly therefore time to start planning for the decades ahead. Over to RCN and the good people in it!

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**MARK CONWAY**  
Inaugural Chairperson RCN

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# Rural Development Council

**F**rom as far back as I can remember there has been a relationship between RDC and RCN and for me that accounts for almost twenty of the twenty five years that both organisations have been in existence.

In fact, my first role within RDC was within Community Based Actions. The CBA team was set up in 1996 to deliver EU Peace Programme funding to rural communities, working in partnership with RCN to form what was known as the Rural IFB - an Intermediary Funding Body for the EU Peace Programme. This partnership approach in the delivery of the Community Based Actions measure ensured that rural communities right across Northern Ireland engaged in and had access to the Peace Programme. The response for funding was great and the projects were many and varied. Indeed it gives me great pleasure to witness how many of these groups remain in existence today and that the RDC and RCN partnership, in some small way, may have contributed to their success along the way.

Both organisations are in no doubt about the value of partnership and bringing together the diversity of skills, knowledge

and experience particularly when it comes to promoting rural development and working for the betterment of rural communities.

I still remember in 1999 the announcement that there was no longer a need for a Rural IFB and the tremendous rural lobby that mounted resulting in a further £13.18m being secured and the continuation of a rural specific IFB until 2009.

That said, working in partnership it is not without challenge and both organisations have seen many changes over the years which have brought with them ups and downs but we always seem to arrive back to recognising the huge benefits to be gained through working in partnership and collaboration.

As we embark on a future of new challenges and opportunities facing into Brexit, the outcomes of elections,

continued budgetary pressures and concerns for sector sustainability, one thing is certain, we need to continue to work together to strengthen the rural presence and ensure the rural voice is heard.

We wish RCN all the very best as they celebrate 25 years and wish them well for the future.

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**TERESA CANAVAN**  
Chief Executive

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# No point hankering after the status quo

**Network News spoke to Denis McKay North Antrim Community Network founder member and founding Board member of Rural Community Network about the formation of community networks in the Glens of Antrim.**

**NN How did the Glens of Antrim Community Development Association come about?**

**DMcK** – Before GARCDA was formed we had individual community groups operating in three of the Glens, namely Cushendun District Development Association, Cushendall District Development Group and Glenariffe Development Group. These three separate associations were established and working together as the Glens Development Group. I can only speak for Cushendun where a loose association, a village committee was established in 1985. As far as I can remember Malachy McSparran heard Cushendall were developing a community group in the village and that was motivation for people in Cushendun to establish one. The three groups came together out of necessity and to be honest funding was a motivation as well as we all realised that together we would have a lot more leverage with potential funders. GARCDA

adopted its constitution in 1987. We worked away and encouraged the establishment of community organisations in each of the Glens and we had some members from outside the Glens geographical area.

Some of our committee members and groups were initially content to remain as a Glens of Antrim organisation but there were other member groups and people, myself included, that recognised the value of a wider North Antrim alliance of community organisations. If we had remained as GARCDA we would probably continued to have been perceived as an organisation dominated by one side of the community. So we decided that we needed to expand the coverage of the Network and we met with new members in villages across North Antrim who wanted to join us or who were interested in finding out more. I'm a keen fisherman and I remember I often brought a bag of fish with me to distribute to people we were meeting in those new groups, it was a great way of breaking the ice.

GARCDA then became North Antrim Community Network in 1997. Initially we expanded into five wards adjoining the Glens as this corresponded with the North Antrim Area Based Strategy brought in

under the first Rural Development Programme. Re-naming as North Antrim Community Network was more reflective of the wider reach of the Network.

**NN What were the key successes for the Network in the early days?**

**DMcK** A key milestone was when we employed our Network Development officer Breige Conway who is still with the Network as Manager. We were very lucky to recruit Breige and she played a key role in developing the Network. The Network Directors still retained their role and took the strategic decisions and that was how it should operate. We had a strong group of people democratically elected on our Board who were all very active in their respective communities and I think we gave good support and complemented the work of the staff. I would say our key success was getting new groups to join the Network and ensuring that there was a wide range of groups from across the community in North Antrim who could buy in to what we were trying to do. We offered practical advice and support to groups when they were setting up and we were able to help groups access a computer which helped them with their administration and communication.



## **NN What were the key challenges for NACN in those early years?**

**DMcK** A key challenge was getting around all those small member groups, working with them to get organised with a clear plan of what they wanted to do. I believe there is a natural limit to how far a local network can reach, especially in rural areas where distance is an issue. NACN couldn't expand much further beyond the North Antrim area with Cushendall as a base because the travel time to other areas would have been prohibitive.

## **NN How did you get involved with the original board of RCN?**

**DMcK** I was an original board member and as I recall we were invited, as a strong rural network, to get involved in the Board of RCN by sending a representative. One of the key motivations for us to get involved, to be honest, was due to RCN's developing role as a distributor of funding to rural communities at that time and we were keen to learn how we could benefit from RCN.

## **NN what were the key issues RCN faced in those early years?**

**DMcK** I'd say the most important challenge was raising rural issues - Rural representation and raising the rural voice to policy makers and decision makers. In our view government was spending millions in cities and towns on

regeneration and community development but very little in rural communities. At that time farmers were having more bad years than good years and many of the smaller farms were only keeping going through income earned off the farm. A key challenge was to ensure that rural communities were getting a fair share of EU funding. The Rural Halls programme run by RCN became very important at that time and it allowed rural communities to either develop or renovate community meeting spaces and places where people could come together and develop services. I would say at that time we also reflected the views of smaller farmers who weren't members of the UFU and whose concerns would have been very different from those larger farmers who were UFU members.

## **NN What were the key successes of RCN in those early days?**

**DMcK** I'd say the Halls Programme was a key success and was money that was very well spent across a wide range of rural communities throughout Northern Ireland. The other key success was that people realised they could make their voice heard through working collectively and that important issues could be raised with decision makers.

## **NN Looking back what would you say are the key lessons from your involvement in NACN and RCN?**

**DMcK** Once people are stirred out of their lethargy they will become active and make their voice heard. I found that lots of people involved in community development in committees are blow-ins or incomers to that community, including myself. Although I had links to Cushendun - my father was from here - I grew up in Glasgow. I think the input of outsiders is a good thing in a community as it stirs people up and gets the locals involved, as they would say "who does he think he is spouting off when he's only been here a few years - I've been living here all my life and I have something to say as well!" Rivalry between villages and places can be a good thing and it can motivate people to push on and get their own projects up and running.

I think in many rural areas older people liked to live below the radar and not stir things up too much they just accepted poor services or circumstances. If you want to improve things in your area then you have to raise your voice. Change is happening all the time anyway and there's no point hankering after the status quo, you have to try and shape change to benefit your area.



# Community Places

**W**e share a common ambition with RCN. It is to help ensure that communities have their voices heard and their rightful place in the decision making processes which affect them.

It is thus no co-incidence that down through the years we have often worked in partnership with RCN on furthering community engagement and participation. This has ranged from jointly supporting practical programmes and projects for local facilities and services, to lobbying on broader policy fronts including planning and rural disadvantage.

As two relatively small organisations, each with a wide regional remit, we know at first hand the real mutual benefits of sharing information, skills and resources and being creative to maximise impact. A recent example is our joint "Re-thinking Nimbyism" multi-media project. It challenges the prejudices all too many

have about what motivates people who love the place they live to advocate for its sustainable development.

Without the voices that RCN enables, some communities would simply be swept aside in the onward rush for short term gains at long term cost to wellbeing. The challenge for many of us in the future will be to provide the solid ground from which such voices can be heard loud and clear – and respected. We look forward to pursuing this cause with our RCN partners for many years to come.

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**COLM BRADLEY**  
Director

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# Combating de-population and developing rural communities

**Jennifer McLernon worked for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) as one of three Rural Area Co-ordinators (RAC) at the time RCN was established and the new Rural Development Programme was being introduced. In this discussion with RCN she reflects on some of the issues facing rural communities at the time and how the Rural Development Programme influenced the Department's approach to wider socio-economic issues in rural areas.**

**NN Jennifer, tell us a bit about your background and how you ended up working on the Rural Development Programme.**

**JMcL** My early career was in teaching and delivering training in the Hospitality Sector. I then took up a lecturing post in the Department of Agriculture in the Communications Department at Loughry College. From there I went on secondment to NIPSA for 4 years after which I returned to DANI as a training officer and eventually became Departmental Training Officer. I spent a year in policy division in DANI mainly on European Funds and legislation. It was basically a desk job and that probably didn't best suit my personality or disposition but it was to be useful experience. Then the Rural Development Programme (RDP) came along. It sounded like an interesting initiative and I liked the idea of engaging and working with communities so I applied for one of the RAC posts.

**NN What do you remember of the Department's focus on rural development before the rural development programme? Was it on the agenda of the Department in any way?**

**JMcL** The RDP was a European wide initiative and it put rural development on government's agenda. Initially I believe there was some debate within government as to whether RDP would even be a DANI responsibility. Bill Hodges who was the Permanent Secretary in the Department at the time hadn't come from an agricultural background which perhaps contributed to him seeing the wider picture and championing rural development. He argued strongly that it needed to be located within the Department. Felix Dillon was just below permanent secretary level and he related well to rural development with Gerry McWhinney, who became my direct boss. I think they understood what rural development was aiming to achieve and connected well to some of the main players across rural Northern Ireland.

**NN How did the emergence of the Rural Development Programme change the approach of the Department regarding the significance of rural development?**

**JMcL** Initially within the Department there was some tension between the more traditional agricultural side and the rural development side whose main concern was engaging with the non-farming rural community. For the roll out of LEADER<sup>1</sup> DANI set up a new Rural Development Division with a policy team at Dundonald House and three regional teams. Sean Nugent was responsible for Tyrone and Fermanagh, Martin McDonald was responsible for Armagh and Down and I looked after counties Derry and Antrim. Our role was to work as Rural Area Co-ordinators. Although we were employed by DANI which was to become DARD, we were to assist the co-ordination of all appropriate government interventions in those rural communities

as well as ensuring LEADER<sup>1</sup> funding was spent. That was the theory, but in practice we sometimes found it difficult to make significant impact with some other Departments and local authorities where personnel jealously guarded their territory. LEADER<sup>1</sup> was aimed at rural community initiatives rather than agricultural initiatives and also targeted the most deprived rural wards. As we developed the programme there was debate within the Department as to how we should develop projects. One school of thought was that we should focus on economic development and work with the business people in rural communities who could develop projects that would bring employment to those areas. There was a tension though with some of us who saw that there was also a need for more social development type projects and that the "softer" projects, as I would call them, were legitimate to do.

**NN You worked for the Department when both RCN and RDC were established in 1991. Why did the Department actively support rural development organisations at that time?**

**JMcL** Rural Community Network's role at that stage was to animate the groups on the ground in rural communities and I saw how important that was. We needed those groups to be able to submit project bids that we could fund. RCN was already in existence and was doing animation work. The Rural Development Council (RDC) was established to encourage and develop project ideas and support groups to submit projects to DANI for funding. LEADER funding was used to match other funding but the initial idea was that the community had to find 10% match funding of their own, either in cash or in

1 The LEADER programme (an acronym in French meaning Links between actions for the development of the rural economy) is a European Union initiative to support rural development projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalise rural areas and create jobs



kind, to put into the project. An example of this was the Glenshesk Hatchery and Rivers Restoration project developed by an association of angling groups around Ballycastle. The river system and salmon stocks had been badly damaged in disastrous floods in 1990. With a comparatively small funding package members of this association physically helped to build the hatchery. They certainly gave their time and expertise to gathering the roe, from what was left of local salmon, to stock the new hatchery and then manage it. The plan included environmental, social/leisure and economic outcomes as both locals and visiting anglers could be accommodated.

The animation and development of grass roots groups was an essential element in those early days and was the foundation of later success. When I started as Rural Area Co-ordinator in Derry and Antrim my perception was that the community infra-structure in parts of those counties was less well developed than say in Fermanagh or in County Armagh. After five or six years of work by RCN and the Rural Support Networks there were viable groups in Derry and Antrim that allowed these areas to attract their fair share of RDP funding. Rural Support Networks were important in encouraging local groups to take responsibility for their own networking.

RCN also played a key role in keeping a focus on the social development issues that needed to be addressed when some agencies and authorities would have interpreted their aims in a way that focused on the economic development side of rural development. I saw my role then as getting the RDP funding spent effectively and we tried to be as flexible as possible within the rules to make that happen. If we saw a good idea from a

community we would work with them to provide the support to get an application over the line. Our ultimate aim in supporting both RCN and RDC was to reduce out-migration from rural communities by providing infrastructure and opportunities that made it possible for people to remain with a reasonable standard of living. The main issues we were concerned with were economic development and job creation, public transport, services, leisure facilities and the provision of public or affordable housing.

## **NN Were any views expressed on this changing policy direction by the then Direct rule ministers?**

**JMCL** I don't recall much of an issue in relation to our direct rule ministers at the time. As long as decisions had been cleared by senior departmental officials they were largely content.

## **NN From your point of view what were the challenges the RDP faced at that time?**

**JMCL** One of the big challenges was getting local stakeholders, including farm families, to engage. We found it easier to engage with the business people in the community or those who were focused on economic development and regeneration. Another challenge was working with local authorities to get them to address community development as this wasn't an issue that was on their radar at the time. The other challenge for the Department as a funder, and for the LEADER programme was to avoid delivering 'white elephants'. We did have to try and manage that as funders and ensure that public money was used to achieve the aims of the programme and that it was properly accounted for. In some cases that meant

trying to work with groups who had the bones of a good idea but whose project was perhaps over-ambitious. We might have made suggestions to amend their plans and keep them involved in the programme. Looking back now I don't think too many white elephants were funded through the RDP.

## **NN How did having new partner organisations in the community and voluntary sector change the way the Department worked? Or did it?**

**JMCL** I think it worked because there were sufficient people, both inside the Department, other agencies and in the community sector, who understood what we needed to do collectively to deliver the programme. Whilst, undoubtedly, there were disagreements the shared goal was to develop rural communities and combat the de-population and desertification of rural areas for the benefit of the whole society of Northern Ireland. To be honest, as I remember it, there wasn't a dramatic change in the philosophy of the Department.

The Rural Development Programme was introduced across Europe and we knew we couldn't deliver it ourselves. DARD needed viable community and voluntary groups based in rural areas to help deliver it so it was a pragmatic approach adopted by the Department at the time. I thoroughly enjoyed my time helping roll out the Rural Development Programme across Northern Ireland. I met some amazingly energetic and dedicated people. I think together we made a significant difference through, what was for its time, quite a radical initiative.



# Forkhill Community Development Association

**M**ajella Murphy from Forkhill Community Development Association speaks about the challenges the community faces in the next 25 years. Forkhill is a rural village in the south of County Armagh with a population of 498, close to Dundalk in County Louth and Newry in County Down. Forkhill is a small village but there is a strong community infrastructure, with a thriving GAA club, community development association, senior citizens club and women's group.

During the Troubles the British Army occupied land in the centre of the Village and built one of the largest army bases in Europe. With the onset of the peace process we began a lobby to obtain this eight acre site, which included the former RUC station, for the regeneration of our village. Our aim was, and is, to put the heart back into our community.

With Support from DARD , DSD and our local council and councillors we have been successful, the site has been secured and the twenty social houses built by the FOLD Housing Association, now occupied by young families.

Work is almost complete on a green spaces project which links the school, church and village by a half mile walk way, meandering through the site with historical and cultural features recording the history of the area. Our next major project is to secure funding for business and retail units which will provide local employment. We are unsure about the impact of Brexit on this phase of our Village regeneration.

Our population is growing and we have a gap in support and opportunities for our young people. There is no youth club in Forkhill and if young people are not interested in sport we have little resources for them. Our village sits on the border with North Louth and we are concerned

about the impact of Brexit. Will there again be a physical barrier between us and our southern neighbours? We have worked hard to re-connect with neighbouring communities within the border region since the re-opening of border roads after the Troubles ended. Our people work, socialise and have family and community links across the border. Our young people travel to Dundalk and Dublin to further their education, will this still be affordable after Brexit?

We celebrate and are very proud of our wee village in South Armagh. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty sitting at the foot of beautiful Slieve Gullion. We are a united and growing community ready to face the future in a positive fashion.



# Development Trusts NI

**D**evelopment Trusts NI is a relative newcomer to community development in Northern Ireland. The work we undertake to deliver in support of our members is closely aligned with the work that RCN have been to the fore on for the past 25 years. Where others have come and gone RCN has weathered many storms and consolidated its significance as the lead advocate promoting the interests of rural communities.

Those times of change have largely been at the behest of the public purse holder seeking more services for less investment and all the while many of the problems that characterise rural life persist. Those problems, the lack of investment in the economic infrastructure, reduction in public services and access to services, migration and social isolation continue to shape the rural experience. Having an advocate, a representative body like RCN has been, and remains, pivotal in ensuring the voice of rural communities is heard and their needs are met. You don't develop a track record of 25 years in rural development by getting it wrong but by consistently doing it right.

Recently DTNI have had an opportunity to promote an agenda of community ownership, of promoting the rights of communities, to own, to buy, to build and to shape the places in which they live. Recently we have progressed on asking the

question on whether Lough Neagh might be brought into community ownership and that the bed of the Lough be acquired by the communities that surround it and developed as a resource for social and economic renewal. In asking that question we ventured into the rural communities that have a vested interest in the Lough. We were ably partnered in that process of engagement by RCN and in particular by its present Director Kate Clifford. Without the intervention of RCN we would not have reached out to the significant numbers of people needed to make our consultation on the future of the Lough viable. That we concluded our work on community ownership of the Lough and presented a report on the Future of Lough Neagh is testament to the knowledge and expertise of RCN.

DTNI would like to congratulate, celebrate and share in your 25 years of active rural community development, of advocacy and

promoting rural voice. We wish you well for the next 25 years in facilitating rural, in place shaping and in changing the places in which we live so that they continue to represent the types of places we want, that we need to sustain our rural way of life.

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**CHARLIE FISHER**  
Programme Manager

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# Keep your Eyes on the Prize

**C**asting my mind back 25 years may run the risk of rewriting history, but hopefully I can highlight some useful memories and perhaps some lessons. Overall it is fair to say that things would have been much worse for rural areas had rural development not taken place.

RCN has played a significant role in that process. That may be stating the obvious but, when I think back to the 1980s, rural areas were largely forgotten. This neglect became a concern to some in the Belfast-based voluntary sector and, in conjunction with the then DHSS, the sector picked up on an opportunity from the EU poverty programmes to begin to address rural poverty. This programme focused on 3 rural pilot areas and ended in 1990 when a new focus on Rural Development emerged from the EU. This new focus extended the remit of existing Agricultural institutions to address the wider concerns of rural communities. Locally the Department of Agriculture (DANI) stepped into this role and soon incorporated its new responsibilities into its name, transforming from DANI to become DARD – the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Large credit for this new emphasis on the need to pay attention to Rural Development rests with the EU; which went on to develop the LEADER\* Programmes. In its first phase in NI the LEADER programme was implemented by the Rural Development Council (RDC). Local authorities had hoped for a larger role in the management of the Rural Development Programme. This eventually came about in the second phase of the LEADER programme. In parallel to the growth and development of RDC, RCN was set up to support networking, promote a voice for rural communities and support community development.

RCN's commitment to address our divided society played a part in how every aspect

of the work was carried out. Community Development (CD) was core to this work and RCN set about supporting a comprehensive coverage of rural NI through helping and supporting the development of local rural support networks who would support and promote community development activity. The crucial decision of RDC to shift from its community development approach to a project-based delivery approach, left RCN with a greater role in keeping a focus on community development.

Concepts of Rural Development were being hotly debated at every level of the EU; from what value should be placed on each pillar of social, economic and environment content within funding support programmes, to how agriculture might lose out in this new debate. The interplay of networks from the most local to developing new partners across the EU was heady stuff in its time. Keeping the voice of local communities to the fore in all of this was vital. The Small Grants programs of the new EU Peace Programme in 1995 and later the Millennium Halls programme both enabled RCN to deliver tangible benefits to local rural communities. RCN's Community Development educational work, networking and funding of CD with support from DARD was highly significant in keeping the voice of rural communities in mainstream policies across the board. All of this work was a modest, if important backdrop, to the cease fires and peace process which was to come.

Having a well-developed community infrastructure with a set of core values is

no small legacy. Keeping an awareness of other local national and international rural community development experience and sharing this experience continues to be vital for the future.

When looking back it is true to say rural areas are more vulnerable now than ever before; Brexit will be hard to counter; shifts in the economy such as the 2007 crash disproportionately affected rural areas and the recent fall of the political institutions will leave a vacuum. Turf wars are a waste of time and energy, and I do not absolve myself from this lesson, but keeping good relationships, while working on conflicts, is something to keep to the fore. There is only one question for those working with rural communities and it is this, *'is what you are doing benefiting rural communities, not yourself or your institution?'* If you can affirm this you will not go far wrong. Others will make this assessment but for what it is worth my conclusion is that RCN have stepped up to this challenge pretty well and have not been complacent.

Finally I could have named so many wonderful people in this piece but, alas they are too many. To a staff and board and leaders, many of whom have stayed the course for the full 25 years, we all owe you a great debt. It was a great honour to work along-side you for a short time.

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**NIAL FITZDUFF**  
Inaugural Director RCN

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# From the Market Yard to Oldtown Street

**A** light hearted reflection on the development of RCN by our longest serving staff member Kathryn Kerr.

Having started with RCN in May 1992 never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined I would still be here 25 years later nor to be honest would the organisation.

I was employed on a 2 year contract and for RCN to still be functioning at such a high level is testament to the drive, tenacity and forward thinking of its directors and I have actually enjoyed every minute of it.

RCN's first official office was in Molesworth Street, with Niall Fitzduff's office overlooking the main street while I was stuck beside the Market Yard, with the drone of the auctioneer trying to compete with the cows. It was during these days that I honed my computer skills with solitaire and minesweeper; I believe this could have been classed as continuing professional development. Amenities were limited to say the least – the kitchen was a large cupboard with a sink and only cold water and the public toilets were 2 floors below. On the upside it was above a local pub, and with Board meetings stretching into the evening, I usually just managed to get in before last orders.

After a few years and the promise of more staff, we moved to *luxury* offices in James Street – certainly luxury in comparison. Again, two floors up and with external metal steps, it was obviously built long before anyone considered disabled access – and the enclosed steps were frequently a refuge for those with a penchant for alcohol. Staff numbers started to rise but partners were still needed to make up the numbers at the Christmas dinners. Technology has certainly changed things over the years – and for the better. Then publications were typeset in house, with

change after change after change, stamps had to be bought, licked and runaway carts, with minds of their own, wheeled up to the Post Office with the hundreds of publications.

As this space became cramped we expanded across the entry to 47 James Street. This office felt like a sauna in summer and like the dawn of the ice age in winter. Health and safety wouldn't have been great either in those days. Our fire evacuation 'policy' was to clamber out of the window onto a pointed roof top or open a box, throw a ladder out of the window while hopefully not breaking a leg on descent – depending on which side of the alley you were on.

Our new building in Oldtown Street is definitely luxury compared to all that went before. Now we have state of the art computer systems, heat, a car park and a dishwasher. Staff numbers have gone from 2 to 34 and now back to 6. But we still have the paperwork from 25 years ago despite our best efforts trying to tidy the place. So our filing system still makes use of James Street – a place where some staff have never dared to set foot!

I have had the pleasure of working with a rich variety of people over the years and have made many lifelong-friends among the unbelievable total of 100 people who have been employed by RCN. I can still remember each of them, and many of their idiosyncrasies! RCN has come such a long way thanks to Niall, Mark Conway

and others, who over their coffees in Turkington's café in Cookstown, were the initial driving force securing funding for not only this Network but also the rural support networks.

Over the years RCN has benefitted from the input of Board members and a range of staff who have come and gone as their project work has ended and other projects are initiated to meet the needs of rural communities. Rural communities have been enriched by projects like Millennium Halls, Community Halls Advisory Service, Women's Sectoral Programme, Rural Community Estates Programme, Technical Assistance, Rural Enablers Programme and Skills for Solutions, many of which have evolved or morphed into other things.

RCN's work is ever changing; reflecting the nature of rural communities and society. Nothing stands still but the work of the Mediation Unit – now known as Cohesion, Sharing and Integration and the core unit of RCN, that of supporting and relaying the voice of our rural members remains our focus. That was, is and will always be at the heart of our work – some things remain the same.

So, here's to the next 25 years by which time I will be 80 – hard to believe I know – and just might be eligible for the new state pension.

# From Rural Remainder to Rural Asset

**Gareth Harper and Roger O'Sullivan were joint editors of Network News. Here they reflect back on their 20 combined years of working in Rural Community Network.**

We both took up our posts in RCN at the end of 1990s, a time before individual work emails, mobiles that fitted in your pocket, when 'all other duties' in your job description really meant it.

Working in RCN was a time of growth and development both for the organisation and ourselves. The Policy, Research and Information (PRI) team had been established with encouragement from the rural sociologist Mark Shucksmith of Newcastle University and an ambitious vision by Niall Fitzduff, RCN's CEO with a work ethic second to none. Our role was to bring policy and evidence into the core of the organisation and for the team to "clean its own face" financially at the same time! This in turn involved providing a service and a challenge function to government who after many years had realised that they needed to understand (or at least show the desire to understand) rural issues in planning and delivering rural services.

RCN's work on the Department of the Environment's *Shaping Our Future* strategy saw a major shift from a sentence on rural in the first document, to a paragraph, to a page and then a section - a change in perception and language - from rural remainder to rural asset. However, we also saw the mixed and conflicting policy decisions for rural communities, that

existed despite the promise of rural proofing, community planning and the rural development programme. The Centralization of Services Strategy, the Noble Index of Deprivation and then PPS14 resulted in one of the last Network News that we worked on together entitled *The onslaught on rural*. Mark Conway summed up the feeling at that time:

*After many years of honestly trying to play a part, PPS14 for me is the last straw... What really is the point when people just ride roughshod over the genuine input of others and dictatorially apply ill-thought blanket policies across a whole series of totally different contexts and issues... you should be ashamed of yourselves. Maybe it's my rural Tyrone arrogance at its worst, but I increasingly think people like us don't deserve the like of you. What consoles me is the sure knowledge that PPS14 or not, our rural people will still be here when you're all long gone. Network News N44*

Mark Conway is a part of RCN folklore - his term as chair of RCN had passed as we arrived and Libby Keys with her compassion and commitment to community relations became our chair and 'go to' person for any event or meeting - always generous with her time and wisdom. (Later Roy Hanna would become our chair followed by Alan Poots - rural community development would become the focus of discussion on those M1 shared journeys!)

Tony Macaulay joined RCN in 1999 as deputy director and head of the Policy research & information team. This

represented a turnaround moment for the organisation and ourselves. The combined drive of the staff and board during those years saw some of the most ground breaking work in giving voice to the difficult issues that communities, organisations and funders faced - understanding the other narrative of the legacy of the Troubles and minority experiences. RCN went through the process of embedding Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (EDI) - led enthusiastically by Michael Hughes, later to become CEO. It was not just telling others how to behave but challenging our own perceptions and others perceptions of us.

*Divisions in rural communities may be less obvious, but no-one can deny that they exist. They affect the whole structure of our communities; in the most personal details of our lives: whom we marry and are friends with, where we worship, where we live, what we say to one another. For many of us, survival is in the silences - the things that are left unsaid, the conflicts that remain 'under the table'. We have a Peace process, but no history of how to do this - a bit like fixing the plane while flying it. And some of the steps we need to take run against deeply learned behaviour.*

*Libby Keys Network News N33*

No reflection on our time spent with RCN and Network News could be complete without reference to the annual conferences; two days in late September when rural community groups had a chance to share best practice and catch up. The moving conference was like a swan



upside down – what seemed like panic on the top but always calm underneath as this tried and tested model had never failed us - from Hilltown to Lusty Beg island, from Knockatallon to Coleraine. That said, our role was to have the annual report ready for day one of the conference and one year the ink on the report had to dry on its way down the motorway in the back of Gareth's Toyota Corolla! Working in RCN was different every day, some days challenging, other days frustrating but always rewarding, mainly because of the people you met and worked with. We had the chance to visit new places and discover new ways of working from very committed people trying to make the most for rural communities often on less than a shoe string. Network News' role was to ensure that it reflected and also informed, from frequently contrasting positions, key areas of concern and debate.

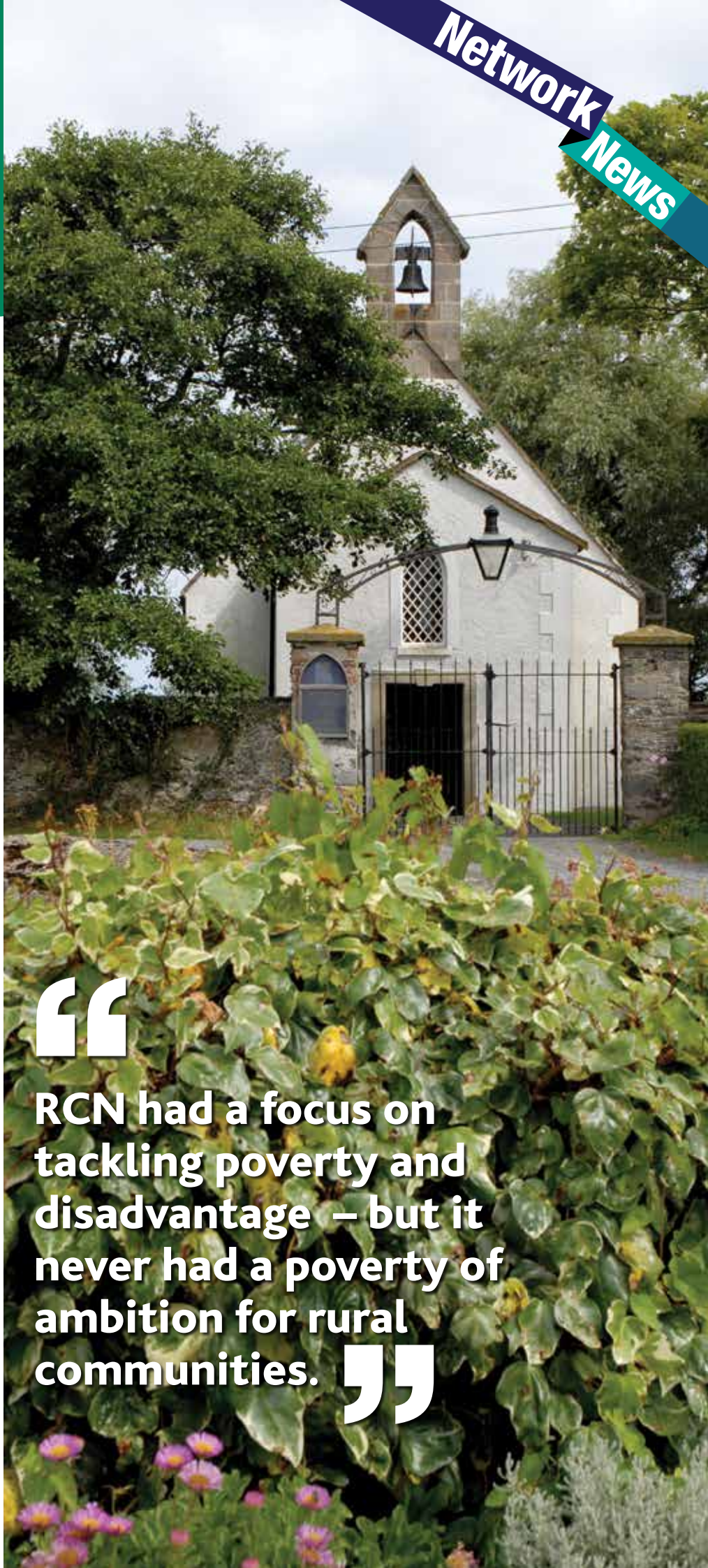
During our time, over 50 community meeting spaces were supported, highly valuable peace building work was funded, areas of low community infrastructure were supported to build confidence, the skills of community organisations' boards and staff members were enhanced, the voice of rural communities was strengthened and a wide range of policy areas were addressed.

Finally, we must take time to remember the sad passing of our colleagues who worked with us on Network News during this time: Ruth Stewart, Carol Foster, Ann McGeeney, Dr. Jimmy Kearney and Dr Jeremy Harbison.

“

**RCN had a focus on tackling poverty and disadvantage – but it never had a poverty of ambition for rural communities.**

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# Cookstown and Western Shores Area Network

CWSAN and indeed the Rural Support Networks are delighted to share in this very special celebration, the Rural Community Network's 25th anniversary. We take this opportunity to congratulate RCN and its current staff on having reached this important milestone, having been a key pillar in supporting and assisting many sub- regional community and voluntary organisations at various points over the past two and a half decades.

We have no doubt that RCN will be joined by many community organisations from right across the country, board members, supporters, staff and colleagues to reminisce and ponder the challenges they have faced and the contributions they have made over the years. Indeed personally, I can recount many positive experiences and also reflect upon the many difficulties faced by the whole community sector over the past 25 years, much of which was mitigated by the support and dedication of RCN staff. Suffice to say, we have most certainly come a long way since RCN first assisted us to develop CWSAN, the local RSN network in the Mid Ulster area in 1996, and to provide support to other Sub Regional Networks over those initial formative years.

Undoubtedly, the past 25 years have been both challenging and eventful but I believe that RCN's longevity is down to the network's ability to evolve effectively as an organisation, to meet the changing needs of the sector and to continue to provide innovative solutions to helping empower local organisations voice rural concerns. A strong sense of belonging to and belief in advocating on behalf of rural

communities, combined with the selfless contribution of many volunteers has been evident in their work since humble beginnings from Cookstown's main street in the 1990's. It is this contribution that undoubtedly has helped create the success of many of our Rural Support Networks who today, independently, strongly, forge their own way in what certainly isn't an easy operating environment.

The RCN's role in promoting the sustainable development of rural communities, initially through the support of local support organizations such as CWSAN, has indeed served the rural community well. Supporting a community development approach has ensured that the voice of small, local rural communities has been heard collectively, practice to policy made appropriately, and civic leadership developed immeasurably. As part of the supporting infrastructure, owned and managed by the collective rural community, RCN has indeed helped to create and encourage those most disadvantaged to engage in community activity to address social need, cohesion, social exclusion and to embed a shared future through their work.

Going forward, we wish RCN, in their efforts to continue delivering a strong advocacy role in supporting rural communities, and in particular through encouraging community collectives to decipher and help rural policy outcomes, become more meaningful and accountable to all who work or reside in rural communities. The secret to date has been that RCN certainly understands fully that those communities know best in the identification of and provision of solutions to their own particular issues and are certainly best placed to facilitate positive change with appropriate support initiatives. As Lao Tsu wrote, "start with what they know, build with what they have...", when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say "we have done this ourselves". A true reflection of much of the behind the scenes work embodied by the RCN.

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**CONOR CORR**  
CWSAN  
Development Manager

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# Community Foundation NI

**I**t is a privilege to be given the opportunity to contribute to the Rural Community Network's 25th anniversary celebrations.

The histories of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and Rural Community Network have been very much interlinked as both organisations have a long association in working together in efforts to address issues of poverty, social exclusion and sectarianism. Whilst this work has been challenging, what has been consistent in our work with RCN has been their steadfast commitment to rural communities and to community development principles and practices.

This operating ethos has enabled many joint projects between our organisations. When we sought European support for a fledgling Peace Process, RCN provided an invaluable critical dimension to this highlighting their own experiences and the experiences of their members. RCN has an invaluable expertise in the particular nuances of the impact of the conflict within a rural context and the way rural community organisations are making vital

contributions to keep their communities together, to be cohesive and to build relationships.

We've seen RCN as one of the key community development contributors to a wide range of strategic projects we've been involved in, including grants panels, the early development of the Building Change Trust and the Space and Place Programme. RCN's rural perspective makes positive contributions to address poverty, inequality, sectarianism and discrimination in all its forms. We particularly celebrate that RCN continues to take risks; we know that being a critical voice for rural communities can place the organisation in uncomfortable spaces. Rural communities should be grateful that there is such an organisation fighting for rural issues; reminding policy/programme makers and funders, including ourselves, that rural communities are of equal value, that life experiences in rural areas are different but that rural does and will, given equality of

opportunity and investment, play its part in the development of a society that is fair, just and peaceful.

On behalf of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland may I congratulate Rural Community Network for its achievements and contributions to not only rural communities but also wider society in Northern Ireland. We will continue to find ways to work together and look forward to the challenge of how we as an organisation consider rural proofing in our work.

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**ANDREW MCCrackEN**  
Chief Executive Community  
Foundation for Northern  
Ireland.

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# NIRWN a focus for Rural Women

**RCN spoke to Majella Murphy a founding member of South Armagh Rural Women's Network and NIRWN Co-ordinator and Louise Coyle NIRWN Development Officer about the origins of NIRWN and its contribution to rural community development over the past decade.**

## **NN How did NIRWN come about?**

**Majella & Louise:** NIRWN was founded in 2006 as a result of a lobby for support for rural women across NI. This lobby was led by the then 6 rural Women's Networks, Women's Resource and Development Agency and RCN.

Fermanagh Rural Women's Network and RCN had run a conference on women and community development called "Making the Tea or Making the News" in 2003 which kick started the rural women's policy forum and gave voice to the specific needs of rural women.

Following the Ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement there had been a mushrooming of women's groups across the North, supported by lead groups in their areas which then developed into local women's networks following the Fermanagh model. 6 separate women's networks became established in: South Armagh, Roe Valley, Omagh, Newry & Mourne and Mid-Ulster alongside Fermanagh. These were all independent organisations who met regularly and accessed Lottery funding to employ staff and run programmes.

## **NN What types of work did the Rural Women's Networks do?**

**Majella & Louise:** The core work was grass roots community development and

training for rural women delivered at the point of need. We delivered basic community development and capacity building courses to rural women with childcare costs and travel costs included. The fact that childcare and travel costs were included allowed women who previously wouldn't have been involved in community education to participate. The expenses were paid by cheque and that meant women, who had never had bank accounts before, had to open their own accounts. For some women on those programmes that was an important step in building their personal independence as it raised those women's consciousness of their importance as individual people, rather than them seeing themselves as a wife or mother or partner.

The Networks began realising the importance of responding to policy and the need to lobby on women's issues. As the new Assembly started to develop legislation, and local Ministers began to shape the services government departments were delivering, we knew we needed to be influencing those decisions but knew that this was a gap in our skills. We realised that unless we worked to influence the development of policy which would influence how services were delivered on the ground the circumstances that led to the exclusion of women would persist.

Funding was running out for the 6 Rural Women's Networks and we faced the prospect of closure. During our lobbying for funding the feedback from politicians and officials was that they wanted the Networks to ensure complete geographical coverage across NI and weren't interested in funding 6 separate organisations. The Networks received a funding extension from DSD to allow time

for us to develop a rural women's infrastructure across NI. This was a big shift for both staff and management committees of the Networks as we had been focused on the sustainability of our organisations and in that extension period we had to re-focus on how we could sustain the work rather than the organisations.

## **NN Why was there a need for a separate women's rural network?**

**Majella & Louise:** Women were coming out to local women's groups and getting involved in their programmes and taking on leadership roles in those groups but they weren't getting involved or leading in wider local community development initiatives. Gender equality wasn't an issue that was talked about much in rural communities at that time. We felt we had to develop a regional network as we couldn't sustain the 6 local networks and most of us believed that we needed to sustain the work. Our motivation was to ensure that women's voices would be heard in debates on community development, on policy and on service delivery across rural NI. There were huge challenges for us as 6 separate organisations moving to one regional organisation.

## **NN What have NIRWN's achievements been?**

**Majella & Louise:** NIRWN has developed a strong rural policy voice for women and, to an extent, we have addressed the previously unmet need of strategic, regional support that the 6 Networks recognised existed when the Assembly came into being. We deliver strategic support for rural women. We are a central point for: networking; consultation; policy

2 Women and Public Appointments in NI [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/11914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/11914.pdf)  
3 Women in Politics and the NI Assembly [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem\\_exec\\_review/women-in-politics.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem_exec_review/women-in-politics.pdf)





support; funding support etc. We aren't aware of any other women's network working at regional level across these islands for the specific benefit of rural women. We have represented the rural women of NI at local, regional, European and International level.

We have built strategic relationships across government, the community/voluntary sector and wider, raising the needs and issues of rural women and supporting others to deliver better and address these needs. We have strong relationships in the rural sector, working closely with RCN and RDC. We are celebrating our 10-year anniversary having weathered sudden and extreme funding cuts; historic underfunding of rural women's activity and our survival is a testament to the fact that our members recognise the need for NIRWN.

One of the keys to NIRWN's success is that we have a core of management committee members who have been with the organisation since day one and they value the work that needs to be done with rural women. It's been vital to have that core group of committed women and we need to retain that commitment and stay true to the values we started out with.

## **NN What were the Challenges NIRWN faced?**

**Majella & Louise:** Well if NIRWN wasn't here would rural women's voices be heard? We have put a lot of work into addressing the equality issues rural women face and ensuring the International mechanisms such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security are applied

for the benefit of rural women in NI. Our work on the Rural Development programme NI Monitoring Committee has been instrumental in ensuring that the Department and LAGs have been held to account on the fact that women and young people have consistently been under-represented as beneficiaries of the Rural Development Programme in NI.

We lost our funding 4 years ago to provide grass roots community development training and capacity building which has been a big loss to rural women's groups; particularly in light of the removal of core funding for wider community education across the region. We started with 6 full time staff and we are now down to 2 part time staff so we're much more constrained in what we can do.

Another significant challenge to our work was the end of core funding for the 6 local rural women's networks as we lost an important local resource for women's groups across 5 areas of NI. South Armagh Rural Women's Network is still operational; delivering on cross community projects, but very much dependent on securing project funding.

## **NN What are your hopes for the future?**

**Majella & Louise:** We would like to ensure the sustainability of the work of NIRWN and ensure the sustainability of the policy input to shape service delivery and policy development to meet the needs of rural women and ensure the voices of rural women are heard.

In our view there is a grave inequality that c. 1.3% of the direct allocation of government funding going to women's groups is directed at rural groups

compared to urban groups who had the balancing 98.7%. We are hopeful that rural proofing will go some way to challenging this. It is imperative that women in rural areas are listened to and supported so that their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society.

## **NN In your opinion has the position of rural women improved over the past 10 years?**

On balance, it has improved but it depends on what sphere of life you look at and it is obviously very difficult to generalise. There are more women now involved in leading community organisations at grass roots level and they are more vocal. It is positive that young women can now look at three of our local political parties and see that they are led by women. For young women now there are strong female role models in politics right at the top of political parties and there's nothing to stop them from thinking if they can do it why can't I?

The LAGs who distribute rural development programme money at the local level have improved their gender balance and have more women in decision making roles but several LAGs have gender action plans in place to tackle gender inequality.

It is imperative that our region has 'visible' women at decision-making level if sustainable peace is to be achieved. Women in NI remain under represented in public<sup>2</sup> and political life<sup>3</sup> and rural women's participation in public life is further hindered by accessibility to education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport and distance from decision making spaces.

# Supporting Peace-Building Beyond Belfast

The Beyond Belfast Steering Group was established in 2009 by the Community Relations Council (CRC) and Rural Community Network (RCN) to “...gather together existing information on interfaces and contested spaces beyond Belfast and explore opportunities for influencing Government policy and practice and supporting peace-building initiatives.” The group brought together a range of statutory, community and voluntary based organisations.

One of the first pieces of work undertaken by the Beyond Belfast Steering Group was to initiate research into the nature of contested spaces outside Belfast. The impetus to conduct the report was derived from prior research conducted and published titled *Sharing over Separation: A Rural Perspective* which provided a rural view of thematic community relations issues. The *Beyond Belfast – contested spaces in urban, rural and cross border settings* report (2010) examined at conceptual level, the term rural interfaces and its appropriateness in a rural context. It aimed to explore the differences between rural/urban and border contested space areas and the nature of space and social tensions in areas beyond Belfast.

The research found that in Belfast and L'Derry the use of the term Interface was

well understood by people to mean segregation defined by a physical barrier. Outside of these areas, including in rural communities, it was not a concept that was understood by people. The report proposed that the term contested space is used in these areas where segregation exists, and there are invisible barriers between communities, but no physical barriers. It found that the nature, potential, or perception of a space to be contested was tied to a number of features including demographic factors; age and gender; quality of relationships; numbers and/or frequency of trigger events and the number and frequency of attacks on people or symbolic property. The report also identified different types of contested spaces that exist across NI. Finally, the report noted that, on the whole, the majority of policy documents largely ignore or avoid issues of contested space although it was recognised that some Peace 3 plans had raised these issues.

The *Beyond Belfast Report* received significant coverage through the media and press, presentations were also made on the findings of the research to a number of Executive Ministers. One of the most important outcomes of the report was that it influenced the OFMDFM/Atlantic Philanthropies Interfaces Programme. Based on presentations and representations from RCN & CRC it was agreed that the programme would be changed to the Contested Spaces Programme to enable

rural areas to be included. OFMDFM officials also agreed to target more funding at rural contested spaces by disaggregating urban and rural wards to create two lists i.e. a rural top 20% most deprived wards and urban top 20% wards which would enable more rural wards to fall within the remit of the scheme.

The Beyond Belfast report has been significantly referenced within a range of reports at government, academic and community and voluntary sector level including the DoJ's Community Safety Strategy, Grainne Kelly's publication *Progressing Good Relations and Reconciliation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland*, Dirk Schubotz and Paula Devine *Working Paper for Conflict in Cities and the Contested State*, Arts Council NI *Building Peace through Arts*, Guide, OFMDFM/AP Contested Spaces Programme and the Executive *Together: Building a United Community* strategy (T:BUC).

As previously noted, the Executive's T:BUC strategy has significantly altered the good relations policy landscape in terms of the inclusion of contested spaces in rural areas:

*“Segregation is not unique to the urban environment and many of our rural towns and villages are divided not by walls or fences – but by an invisible line in the road or a local landmark.... In rural settings, division can also be played out through patterns of avoidance where people choose not to go to another part of the town to*



*avail of services or go shopping, or even to go to another town entirely."*

T:BUC quotes the *Beyond Belfast* report *"Interfaces are by no means static and can change over time. The Beyond Belfast Report points to a number of possible locations where interfaces and contested spaces can emerge.... We recognise that issues relating to contested space can be particularly complex within a rural setting and we are committed to working with rural organisations in developing an approach to tackling the barriers that prevent greater sharing in a rural context"*

The Beyond Belfast Steering Group has been instrumental in identifying and describing what contested space is and ensuring it is written into government policy and practice on the ground. It continues to work as a multi-agency group to help monitor, influence and build upon this policy and practice on behalf of rural communities.

The Beyond Belfast Steering Group has allowed for the development of rural partnership working in an ever shrinking community/good relations field. Many of the practitioners work in isolation outside of the main cities of Belfast and Derry/ Londonderry and this Forum has allowed for the development and implementation of a wide range of cohesion, sharing and integration programmes across rural Northern Ireland. There are many examples of where this grass roots co-operation has taken place with

organisations such as the Jethro Centre Lurgan, REACT Armagh, Building Communities Resource Centre, Diversity Challenges, Community Dialogue and the Integrated Education Fund to name a few. Many of the programmes of delivery work with local rural dwellers and community groups and in some instances people who have never engaged in community relations work before.

As well as grass roots initiatives, RCN work alongside the Beyond Belfast Steering Group to produce papers on rural contested issues for Executive Ministers, in order to raise the issue of the importance of rural peacebuilding work and to rural proof on a regular basis T:BUC across the four key headline actions. The Beyond Belfast group also regularly engages with different government departments such as DOJ and TEO in relation to a number of strategies and consultation documents with a rural peacebuilding angle. RCN are also instrumental in ensuring that Executive Office programmes such as United Youth and the Summer Camps have a strong rural element. This on-going policy and practice work ensures that rural community relations work remains on the agenda.

Marion Jamison is a member of the Beyond Belfast Group and is employed as a community relations officer with REACT in Armagh. She reflected on her involvement with Beyond Belfast:

"In my role as Community Relations Officer with REACT I face many challenges and at times it can be a very lonely place. Being part of RCN's Beyond Belfast Group lets me share my experiences with others working in the same field and hear of theirs. It provides us with a support network while also giving us the opportunity to influence Government policy and strategy which we find very difficult to do as separate organisations. The networking this group provides is invaluable to our work. On behalf of REACT I would like congratulate RCN on this their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and wish them continued success in the years ahead."

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**DYMPNA MCGLADE**  
Policy Director Community  
Relations Council

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# The Villages Together

**I**n 1996/97 a group of local community volunteers formed The Villages Together (TVT), a rural community network organisation which set up its base in Bready and remains there today.

The concept was fairly new at the time and after speaking to a few experts in the field including RCN, an application was made under PEACE funding for support for the formal establishment of the group. Michael Hughes was the project officer with RCN at the time and his support, and that of RCN, was central to the establishment and progress of the group, indeed this continues today. RCN has continually given voice to rural groups and TVT relies upon that expertise and knowledge, that is given freely, not to mention the vital connections RCN has throughout the sector and with decision makers. Without RCN rural communities would not have access to information and

support which would leave them in a much poorer place and with even greater struggles to survive.

The Villages Together continues to support community and voluntary groups, schools and faith based groups across the area between Strabane and Newbuildings around to Donemana. It has grown from supporting six village groups to over 100 small, but essential organisations. Its main strengths are the knowledge of the local area, its ability to act as a networking group, a project partner, an advocating body and as a project delivery agent.

Today, the sector is a much tougher place to be. It is a challenge for TVT to maintain its presence when funding is tight, when pressure is on for new ways to generate income and when good groups are under pressure to survive. TVT has always relied on and promoted good relationships within the sector and will continue to do so.

Challenges remain for rural communities in terms of peace-building, particularly in a volatile political atmosphere. Aside from this, it is evident that funding support and project development are likely to continue as pressures on the rural sector for the foreseeable future.

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**NOELLE DONNELL**  
TVT

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Rural Enabler Programme  
Building Peace Locally

## Rural Enabler Project Building Peace Locally

**The Rural Enabler Programme was developed to address issues of sectarianism and racism in rural communities and came about as a direct result of research done by RCN and Community Relations Council, which was published in the report "Sharing over Separation - A Rural Perspective 2009". This research identified barriers to peace building and positive relations in rural and border communities on issues such as Young People, Flags and Emblems, Housing, Interfaces, Racism, Community Development and Community Relations and Rural Institutions.**

The Rural Enabler Programme was the only cross-border, cross-community regional peace building project to be supported by the Special European Union Programmes Body, under Peace III. It was a partnership project with Irish Rural Link and was supported by the Department of Agricultural and Rural Development in Northern Ireland and by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in the Republic of Ireland.

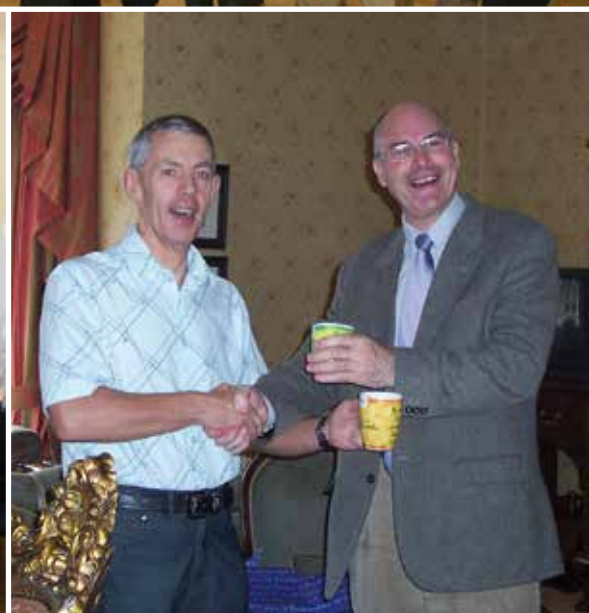
The Enabler Programme placed one worker (called an 'Enabler') in each of the six counties of Northern Ireland and one in each of the six Border counties, as well as having one Enabler working specifically with Institutions which play a key role in the lives of rural dwellers such as the Churches, GAA, Orange Order, Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster etc. The approach adopted by the programme was highly responsive to local needs and Enablers worked to build the capacity, confidence and skills of local people to address issues which were causing them concern and to begin the process of peace building. The project had significant outputs in a number of the key thematic areas:

The project engaged directly with over 11,665 project participants. Over 5000 Young people (10 - 21 years) participated in projects. Over 600 minority ethnic people participated in projects. 135 facilitatory development grants were issued to grass roots groups for dialogue activities, capacity and skills training and shared activities. More than 200 networking events took place and

over 2200 participants undertook training in community development principles, conflict mediation or other peace building. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the project was the number of people who engaged in peace-building work for the first time. Communities were equipped with the skills and confidence to explore difficult issues without the need for ongoing external support.

The work also highlighted a genuine desire in many rural communities to deal responsively and ethically with the legacy of the past. Many communities were highly aware of the ongoing sensitivities and of the day to day tensions of sectarianism in their areas, but felt powerless to address them. This programme offered rural and border communities an opportunity to explore how they could develop a better understanding of the 'other community' and how they could work to build strong foundations for peace-building in their areas.





Rural Community Network  
38a Oldtown Street  
Cookstown  
Co Tyrone  
BT80 8EF  
t. +44 28 8676 6670  
w. [www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org](http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org)  
e. [info@ruralcommunitynetwork.org](mailto:info@ruralcommunitynetwork.org)



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