



APRIL 2021

Peace PLUS Consultation closes 12 May

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is currently consulting with the public on its draft Peace PLUS programme. Peace PLUS will distribute €1BN of funding in Northern Ireland and the 6 Border counties of the Republic of Ireland from 2021-2027. Peace PLUS is an EU funded programme which seeks to build on the work of previous PEACE and INTERREG programmes.

The consultation documents can be accessed [here](#).

A short video produced by SEUPB of Peace PLUS can be accessed [here](#).

Peace PLUS funding will be distributed across the following themes:

1. Building Peaceful and Thriving Communities €210M
2. Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation €143M
3. Empowering and Investing in Young People €110M
4. Healthy and Inclusive Communities €155M
5. Supporting a Sustainable and Better Connected Future €265M
6. Building and Embedding Partnership and Collaboration €47M

21 individual investment areas sit underneath these themes including Smart Towns and Villages, Shared Learning Together Education Programme, Victims and Survivors and Biodiversity, Nature Recovery and Resilience. Theme 4 Healthy and Inclusive Communities includes investment area 4.2 Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion worth €50M.

SEUPB has produced a range of navigation papers and presentations which relate to different aspects of the programme including one on rural communities. These can all be accessed [here](#).

The deadline for responses to the consultation is 12 May at 5pm.

Programme for Government Outcomes Framework consultation

The Executive Office consultation on the Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework closed on 22 March. The Programme for Government Outcomes Framework sets out the headline outcomes and some indicative action areas that the NI Executive aim to deliver. RCN hosted a consultation webinar with TEO officials and a cross section of our membership on 28 February. This was a wide-ranging conversation that helped inform our consultation response. One of the main messages from our members was their frustration that the NI Executive was not delivering enough for local citizens across a whole range of issues.

RCN also called for the inclusion of an outcome in the PFG on housing which was a commitment made in the New Decade New Approach Deal which set out priorities for the restored NI Executive back in January 2020. RCN's response to the consultation is available [here](#).

Community Renewal Fund

The UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) will distribute £220M of funding across the UK in 2021-2022 to help places prepare for the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and to smooth the transition from the EU Structural Funds. The prospectus for the CRF can be found [here](#)

Whilst the Community Renewal Fund is to help places prepare for the introduction of the UKSPF it will not directly influence delivery of the UKSPF. In Britain, the CRF will be delivered across 100 local authority areas that have been identified as eligible to bid for the CRF. In Northern Ireland applications to the Community Renewal Fund will be made directly to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government. £11M has been ring fenced for projects from NI and applications can come from NI Executive Departments, Local Councils, Community & Voluntary Sector Organisations or the Private Sector. Investment priorities of the CRF include:

- Investment in skills
- Investment for local business
- Investment in communities and place
- Supporting people into employment

CRF is 90% revenue funding and the closing date for applications is **18 June 2021** with successful bids announced by the end of July and projects completed by end of March 2022.

Concerns have been raised about the CRF overlapping with the NI Executive's Programme for Government priorities and potential for duplication with other funding streams such as Peace PLUS. The Fund has a very quick turnaround time for organisations seeking to bid into it. It should also be remembered that the EU funding streams the CRF is partly designed to replace required applicants to address equality issues, discrimination and poverty. The CRF prospectus states that the UK government will give due regard to its Public Sector Equality Duty but addressing equality issues, discrimination and poverty will not be part of the project assessment process.

Levelling Up Fund

The Levelling Up Fund (LUF) has also recently been launched by the Westminster Government to improve infrastructure across the UK and is part of the UK government's wider Levelling Up agenda. The prospectus for the Levelling Up Fund can be found [here](#). The LUF will distribute £4.8BN of capital funding across the UK between now and 2024/2025. £800M has been set aside for LUF in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales over the next four years and, of that, up to 3% may be spent on LUF projects in NI in the first year, approximately £24M depending on eligible bids being received.

The LUF three priority areas for spend are transport, regeneration and town centres, and cultural investment. In England, Scotland and Wales LUF will be delivered through local authorities. In Northern Ireland due to our different local government landscape the UK Government will accept bids at the most local level, from a range of local applicants. This can include, but is not limited to, businesses, voluntary and community sector organisations, district councils, the Northern Ireland Executive and other public sector bodies. NI Executive Departments can submit bids under the transport theme but are not eligible to submit bids under the other two themes.

Applications must be submitted in this first round by **18 June 2021**. Spend must be able to commence before end of March 2022 and must be completed by end of 2024. The Centre for Local Economic Strategies has published its challenge to the government's Levelling Up Fund which makes a compelling case for community wealth building to be at the heart of the Levelling Up Fund. Their paper is available [here](#).

Mental Health Strategy Consultation response

RCN responded recently to the Department of Health Consultation on a draft Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031. The consultation response is available [here](#).

We welcomed the principle included in the draft strategy of regional consistency of delivery of mental health services. In our view this is a tacit admission that services that exist currently are not consistently available or consistently accessible across all Trusts. It is welcome that this is acknowledged in the draft strategy but needs to be followed through with resources and actions.

We raised concerns about the digital delivery of mental health services due to the high level of digital exclusion that exists in rural communities. We also raised concerns about the Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by the Department in relation to the Draft Strategy. The RNIA does not present any data to make an assessment as to whether mental health issues are significantly different in rural communities. We disagree with the Department's assessment that a differential is "unlikely". We also disagreed with the Department's assertion that there are no barriers to access mental health services in rural communities. Access to and distance from services should be considered as a significant barrier to delivery of mental health services in rural communities.

RCN Member survey - key priorities for rural communities

RCN undertook a survey of our membership in February. The purpose of the survey was to gather members' views on RCN services and support for the year ahead and to gauge member views on the priority issues in rural communities a year into the pandemic. The survey was administered online, which we acknowledge excludes groups who struggle with digital literacy. It went online on 12 February and closed on 26 February. The survey achieved a response rate of 15.6% of RCN members.

In terms of key priorities for rural communities respondents were asked to rank their top three issues. Responses were weighted and scored according to the number of rankings received. The top three priorities identified by respondents were, in order, health and well-being, broadband, and community development.

Those who prioritised health and well-being included comments which highlighted the importance of tackling mental health and social isolation, of re-building health services post pandemic and addressing waiting lists.

Comments from respondents on broadband included the need to speed up Project Stratum roll out and to ensure that all rural communities were covered by fast broadband.

Respondents who prioritised community development commented on the need for additional funding at local level and support to reach more people with community development activities in local areas.

Joint Evidence Submission to the Justice Committee on the Protection from Stalking Bill

Several members of the Women’s Policy Group were invited to submit evidence to the Justice Committee on the Protection from Stalking Bill. Given the seriousness of stalking, the connection it has to domestic abuse and misogyny, and the increasing types of cyber stalking, several members of the WPG decided it would be best to submit a joint evidence submission. Given the lack of data on stalking in Northern Ireland, WPG carried out primary research with victims of stalking to learn more about their experiences. The results were striking, and further highlighted the urgent need to introduce stalking legislation in Northern Ireland and for it to be as robust as possible. Some key findings from the research include:

- 55.4% of people had been the victim of stalking more than once;
- 84.3% of people had been stalked by someone they knew;
- 79% of people were stalked by an ex-partner or someone they dated;
- 23.7% of people had been stalked by an acquaintance;
- Only 52.6% of people reported their stalking to the police, employer or friends/family;
- Of those who reported their stalking, 61.9% said this was not helpful;
- 39.47% were stalked in real life, 5.26% were stalked online and 57.9% were stalked both online and in real life;
- 100% of respondents said that stalking had long-term impacts on their mental health.

This evidence submission put the voices of victims at the core. It covers the gendered nature of stalking, rising levels of online cyber stalking, the connection between stalking and domestic abuse and femicide, the need to take more preventative measures and how necessary it is to educate people on the seriousness of stalking. Click [here](#) to read the detail of the joint submission made by the WPG members from the Women’s Sector and LGBTQ+ sector.

Rachel Powell – Women’s Sector Lobbyist, WRDA

NIRWN & WRDA evidence to Ad Hoc Committee on Bill of Rights

Louise Coyle from NIRWN and Rachel Powell from WRDA submitted evidence to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights in March. As explained in our last Policy Link publication the Ad Hoc Committee was established by the New Decade New Approach Deal to deliver a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, an outstanding commitment from the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

NIRWN and WRDA's evidence can be viewed at this [link](#) (36 minutes in). Rachel and Louise both emphasised the importance of social and economic rights to women in Northern Ireland and stated their concerns around a Bill of Rights were amplified by the impact of the pandemic and Brexit. The pandemic has impacted disproportionately on women who have shouldered a higher burden of care and home schooling as well as being more vulnerable to unemployment or furlough as they are more likely to be employed in hospitality/retail and other sectors of the economy badly impacted. They also set out their concerns about the potential for diminution of women's rights now the UK has left the EU.

The Key Briefing submitted to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights ahead of the meeting can be accessed [here](#) and it sets out in detail the Women's Policy Group recommendations on what a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland should contain.

Rural Lives Research Highlights Rural Poverty

New research published by Newcastle University in March has found that the UK welfare system is poorly adapted to meet the needs of those living in rural areas. The research was carried out by Newcastle University, Scotland's Rural College and the Impact Hub Inverness. It found that the benefits system is unable to deal fairly with the volatility and irregularity of rural incomes making people in rural areas more vulnerable to poverty.

The research can be accessed [here](#) as well as recordings of the launch events.

The research found that although many rural residents are at risk of poverty it is perceived as an urban issue. Problems have been exacerbated by the centralisation and digitalisation of the welfare system in recent years due to the poor broadband and mobile coverage and limited public transport in many rural areas. Although the research was undertaken in rural Scotland and England, RCN is also concerned about many of these issues in Northern Ireland.

The research highlights the distances people in rural communities are forced to travel to access assessments for disability benefits, the additional challenges of providing social care in rural communities due to distances care workers can travel (whilst unpaid) and that much rural work is not “good work” and can be poorly paid, intermittent and with poor terms and conditions.

The research also found that people are increasingly turning to Community and Voluntary Sector organisations for provision of advice or support although the sector itself is under pressure with reduced levels of funding.

Energy Strategy Policy Options Consultation

The Department for the Economy has launched its Policy Options Consultation for the new Energy Strategy. The consultation builds on evidence received and the key issues identified through the Call for Evidence process. Five working groups covering energy efficiency, heat, power, transport and consumers were established to review the Call for Evidence responses, contribute additional evidence and help to identify and shortlist potential policy options. An expert panel was also established to provide external insight and challenge to the development of this consultation. The consultation documents can be accessed [here](#).

The vision the Energy Strategy is working towards is “net zero carbon and affordable energy” and it sets out the broad policy direction under 4 themes:

- Energy efficiency and reducing energy consumption;
- Replacing fossil fuels with renewables;
- Creating a flexible integrated energy system; and
- Growing a green economy.

These issues are of huge significance to rural communities, and we would encourage our members and rural citizens to engage with the consultation.

The deadline for responses to this consultation is 5pm on 30 June 2021.

New All-Party Group on Homelessness at NI Assembly

A new All-Party Group (APG) on Homelessness was formed on 21 April. APGs are one of the mechanisms at the Assembly through which MLAs from across political parties can meet to discuss issues of interest. The purpose of the group is as follows: “This APG has been established to discuss how we as a society can prevent homelessness and seek to support individuals and families at risk of or currently experiencing the reality of homelessness.” DUP MLA and Communities Committee Chair Paula Bradley was elected as the first chair of the group while Sinn Fein MLA Karen Mullan was elected as Vice-Chair. The Secretariat of the new group, who is responsible for administration for the APG, is Council for the Homeless NI (CHNI). A press release put out on behalf of the APG was covered in the Irish News which you can read [here](#).

It is our hope that this group will provide a valuable link between the homelessness sector and MLAs at the Assembly through which to influence policy in this area. At the first meeting, eight MLAs from right across the political spectrum attended. The Group plans to meet on five occasions between now and the end of the mandate with its next meeting due to be held in early June. The focus of the group is going to be on the development of the homelessness strategy for 2022-2027.

The APG has agreed to allow observers to attend and participate in its meetings. What this means is that representatives of relevant organisations in the housing and homelessness sector are welcome to attend and take part in the Group. If you or a representative of your organisation would like to attend future meetings of the Group as an observer, or you would simply like to be kept informed on the Group or have any questions about the new APG and its future contact mark.baillie@chni.org.uk or by phone on 07765 118360.

Mark Bailie Policy and Public Affairs Officer CHNI

Social Inclusion strategies - expert panel reports published

The development and implementation of Social Inclusion Strategies on Poverty, Disability, Gender and Sexual Orientation was one of the key commitments promised in the New Decade New Approach Deal (NDNA) which was agreed as the NI Executive was restored in January 2020. Expert Panels were appointed for each of the social inclusion strategies and the Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey MLA, recently published the Expert Panel reports in March which can be viewed [here](#).

These set out key themes developed by Expert Panels for each strategy. The Expert Panel reports form the basis on which the Social Inclusion Strategies are being developed by co-design groups drawn from across civil society in line with the co-design and co-production principles committed to in the NDNA deal. The Communities Minister and the Executive will then approve the draft strategies and action plans. Subject to those approvals the Social Inclusion Strategies will go to public consultation in the Autumn - click [here](#) for a more detailed timetable.



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