



JANUARY 2021

Rural Policy Framework update

DAERA officials [briefed](#) MLAs on the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee on its progress with plans for a Rural Development Policy Framework in November. The officials started by setting out the level of investment and some of the achievements of the current Rural Development Programme. The Rural Policy Framework is being developed to inform support for rural communities and to consider future actions to support rural development post EU exit. There are five pillars under the proposed Framework and five working groups were established in Autumn 2019 to scope issues and provide some initial indicative actions for the future. The working groups, which included DAERA officials, other agencies, other Departments and rural stakeholders were:

- Innovation/Entrepreneurship
- Employment
- Tourism
- Social Well-Being and
- Connectivity

A stakeholder event held in January 2020 was attended by over 120 people where the working groups reported back on their findings and initial indicative actions. The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 has slowed progress as officials' efforts were focused on emergency response work but the Department hopes to go out to full public consultation early in 2021. Watch this space.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak recently revealed some detail on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) as part of his [Spending Review](#) announcement last November.

The UKSPF is the UK Government replacement for EU Structural Funds, including the Rural Development Programme. The UK Government has consistently promised that as it leaves the EU, it will invest the same amount of money across the UK as was received through the EU Structural Funds. The Spending Review contained some details on the Fund:

“It will operate UK-wide, using the new financial assistance powers in the UK Internal Market Bill.

Total domestic UK-wide funding will at least match current EU receipts, on average reaching around of £1.5 billion a year (sic).

A portion of the UKSPF will target places most in need across the UK, such as ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and rural and coastal communities. It will support people and communities, opening up new opportunities and spurring regeneration and innovation.”

A Shared Prosperity Fund pilot scheme was announced with £220 million allocated in 2021-2022 to pilot new programmes and approaches. It will operate UK-wide, using the new financial assistance powers in the UK Internal Market Bill.

Further details of the Fund will be announced in a UK-wide investment framework published in the spring. Specific NI projects and programmes of regional significance under the UKSPF announced include:

- £618 million in 4 City and Growth Deals: £163 million in Mid / South / West of Northern Ireland, Causeway Coast and Glens; £105 million in Derry/Londonderry and Strabane; and £350 million in Belfast.¹

¹ This would appear to be funding already announced see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52537062>

- £315 million to support farmers and land managers, and £3 million to support fisheries in Northern Ireland.
- At least one Freeport in Northern Ireland, to be a hub for global trade and investment across the UK, promoting regeneration, job creation and innovation.

From a Rural Community Network perspective 3 key questions arise.

- How will local communities be involved in shaping any NI programmes and projects that emerge?
- How will UKSPF integrate with work the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has already done in developing a Rural Development Policy Framework for NI, which is likely to go to public consultation early 2021?
- Will a ring-fenced pot of funding remain for rural development activity post Brexit?

A longer [version of this article](#) was published on the RCN website in December 2020.

Ministerial Statement on Future Farm support

Minister Edwin Poots MLA delivered an update to the Assembly on [Future Farm Support](#) in November. The Minister stated that we will see the most significant change in agricultural policy for 40 years. He said that leaving the EU provides for an unprecedented level of regional discretion and flexibility for future agricultural support. The Minister said that his intention is to devise support schemes for all farmers to ensure no farmer is left behind. Schemes should help farmers develop their businesses, become more efficient and maximise sustainable returns from their assets. Hill farms and other farms in disadvantaged areas would be well placed to play a major role in delivering environmental outcomes.

The Minister went on to announce several changes that would apply from January 2021 which included removing greening requirements for 2021 scheme year, a neutral solution on the capping of payments and a review of the application of cross-compliance penalties to ensure they are proportionate to the level of non-compliance identified. Further work is being undertaken by officials on the design of a basic area-based resilience payment that provides a safety net designed specifically for NI. This work will be done under the framework of the UK Agriculture Act which became law in November 2020.

Common Agricultural Policy payments to farmers over the seven years from 2013-2019 represented 79% (£1.8 billion) of cumulative total agricultural income.

Climate Change Bill Discussion Document vs. Private Members' Bill on Climate Change

You wait ten years for a Climate Change Bill and then two come along at once! These developments stem from commitments in the New Decade New Approach document to tackle climate change head on and to introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions. In February, the newly restored Assembly declared a [Climate Emergency](#). On 21 July, a debate on a Committee motion on Climate Change and the Introduction of a Climate Change Act which can be read [here](#). By October a cross party group of MLAs had brought forward proposals for a Private Members Bill on Climate Change. The Bill sets a target for NI to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2045 and includes provision to establish an independent office for Climate Change.

In December DAERA published a Discussion Document on a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill. The discussion document contains several sections on policy context and current UK legislation. It also sets out the case for a NI specific Climate Change Act. The key part of the document sets out two pathways which could be taken to address Climate Change in NI. Option 1 is that the Bill will set interim emission reduction targets with a long-term target of net zero emissions by 2050 which “does not consider expert climate change advice”. Option 2 is that the Bill will set interim emission reduction targets with a long-term target that NI makes an equitable contribution to achieving UK-wide net zero by 2050. In previous Assembly debates on climate change Minister Edwin Poots signaled that he was skeptical of an approach that, in his view, would introduce wide ranging legislation without the evidence to back it up. This is partly due to the structure of our agricultural sector with 27% of carbon emissions generated by livestock production. The [UK Committee on Climate Change](#) said in December that NI needed to aim for an 82% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 to make its contribution to the UK net zero target. Either through the Private Members' Bill or the Department's Bill it seems as if binding Climate Change legislation is on the Assembly agenda at last. Whether either

of these Bills can make it through the legislative process in this Assembly mandate is another issue.

The discussion document can be read [here](#). The closing date for responding to the DAERA consultation is Monday 1st February 2021.

Assembly Statement on the Future of Social Housing

Communities Minister Carál NíChuilín made a [Statement](#) to the Assembly on 3 November on Housing Policy. In it she set out the Department's intention to make fundamental changes to housing policy and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. She stated that there was a need to provide more social homes and a need to protect the current Housing Executive stock by tackling the maintenance backlog. She pointed out that in 2002/03 approximately thirteen thousand households were in housing stress but by 2018/19 this had grown to almost thirty thousand households. The Minister said that she is proposing to change the classification of the Housing Executive to a mutual or co-operative designation. This would allow it to borrow private funds and enable it to resume building new social homes and tackle the maintenance issues in the current stock.

The Statement also referenced the need to better protect private renters by bringing in measures to provide greater security in the private rented sector. The Minister stated that the Department was calling time on rogue private landlords and letting agents. She also said that the Department would prioritise action to improve the response to homelessness. The Minister's Statement set out the Department's intention but also acknowledged that the far-reaching changes she was proposing would need the approval of the Executive. RCN welcomes the intention to build more social housing and to address issues in the private rented sector and we look forward to providing further updates as concrete proposals emerge.

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Bill of Rights call for evidence from the Ad-Hoc Committee

The New Decade New Approach document which laid out the priorities for the restored Assembly in January 2020 included a commitment to set up an Ad-Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The creation of a Bill of Rights is one of the remaining commitments from the 1998 Agreement that has yet to be delivered. The Committee is currently seeking views from the public on what they would like to see included in a future Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The committee web page can be found [here](#) and the link to its online survey can be found [here](#).

Note that the consultation closes on 29 January 2021.

Make our Future Fair Campaign

Rural Community Network, along with 165 other organisations, is part of the Human Rights Consortium’s campaign; Make Our Future Fair calling for the introduction of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. RCN has been involved in work calling for the introduction of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland for a long time. RCN believes a Bill of Rights for NI is important because the legacy of the conflict affects people in rural communities every day. Northern Ireland is still a “contested” society and we believe a Bill of Rights is an important baseline so whatever the future holds everyone’s rights are respected.

RCN responded to the consultation on a Bill of Rights conducted by the NIO in 2010. Since 2010 developments have included:

- The introduction of Personal Independence Payment which has had a huge detrimental impact on disabled people.
- The introduction of the two-child limit in Universal Credit which has impacted families and women.
- Social Housing waiting lists continuing to grow with nearly 30,000 people in Northern Ireland on the waiting list in housing stress.
- The exponential growth of the use of food banks.
- Concerns that the UK Government will reduce Human Rights protections now it has left the EU.

RCN encourages its members and rural citizens to sign up to the campaign and get involved. A Bill of Rights should be a basic set of protections that everyone can rely on to regardless of their background. It may not have prevented the developments outlined above but a Bill of Rights with strong enforcement mechanisms could at least have made decision makers more accountable for their actions.

You can find out more about the campaign [here](#)

Public Survey – Paid Leave for Victims / Survivors of Domestic Abuse

Rachel Woods MLA is currently working on a Private Member's Bill to introduce Paid Leave for Victims / Survivors of Domestic Abuse. Paid leave for victims / survivors is something that has been introduced successfully in other areas such as New Zealand, and similar legislative moves have been made in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and elsewhere.

Given the growing prevalence of domestic abuse crimes in NI, which currently accounts for 19.1% of all crimes recorded, the introduction of paid leave for victims / survivors is welcome. The Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA), the Women's Policy Group, the Women's Regional Consortium and several Trade Unions are supporting this proposed bill. WRDA also made calls for paid leave for victims / survivors in a [briefing](#) last year, and the WPG has made several similar calls for stronger legislation regarding domestic abuse, including in its [evidence submission](#) to the Justice Committee and in its [COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan](#) and [webinars](#).

Some of the recommendations WRDA is making includes:

- At least 20 days of paid leave to be available to all workers, enshrined in law, to be paid to victims / survivors of domestic abuse and to be paid at a level to match a full day of pay.
- To be available as a day one right, which can be taken flexibly rather than as a block of leave.
- To cover taking time off to care for dependants who have been victims / survivors; time to access refuge or flee an unsafe home; to access healthcare services, treatment and therapy; and to take part in criminal proceedings.
- To allow workers to request short-term flexible working and for employers to have robust training and support policies in place.

You can provide your views in this public survey [here](#) (**deadline Friday 29th January 2021**). You can read the full WRDA response and Women's Policy Group responses [here](#).

Rachel Powell – Women's Sector Lobbyist, WRDA

Public Survey – Let’s End Period Poverty! Private Member’s Bill

Pat Catney MLA is currently working on a Private Member’s Bill to tackle period poverty by introducing free period products across Northern Ireland. This is to follow the recent legislation passed in [Scotland](#) to provide free period products to everyone who needs them, which is a step further than the recent [pilot scheme](#) announced by Education Minister Peter Weir MLA to introduce free period products in schools with female learners.

Period poverty references the lack of access to period products due to financial constraints and [research](#) shows that period poverty is becoming a growing issue that has worsened with austerity, and as a result of the ongoing [pandemic](#).

WRDA, Women’s Regional Consortium, Women’s Policy Group and others are all supporting this Bill. WRDA is making recommendations for the Bill, to ensure it effectively tackles period poverty and that free products are accessible to those who most need them:

- WRDA is supportive of the proposed bill and believe sanitary products should be free to anyone who needs them; that they should be provided in GPs, schools, colleges, community hubs, health centres, women’s refuges, homeless shelters, LGBTQ+ organisations, foodbanks, women’s centres, libraries and other public facilities.
- This bill will have a positive impact on equality, poverty, tackling stigma, attendance rates at school and workplaces; that the pandemic has made it more difficult to access products and a delivery scheme should be made available for carers, disabled people and those shielding.
- This provision should be open to all who menstruate, including women, girls, trans men and non-binary people and there should be a campaign to tackle the stigma surrounding periods.

You can provide your views in this public survey [here](#) (**deadline Friday 29th January 2021**). You can read the full WRDA response and Women’s Policy Group responses [here](#).

Rachel Powell – Women’s Sector Lobbyist, WRDA



Hate Crime Review

A final report on the Independent Review on Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland has been published. In 2017, following calls for a review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland from a range of sources, a commitment was made by the then Minister of Justice, Claire Sugden MLA, to come back to the Assembly and confirm whether she intended to initiate a review of the legislative framework on hate crime. Whilst a response was not provided prior to the dissolution of the Assembly, a commitment to review Hate Crime Legislation was included in the draft Programme for Government. On 6 June 2019, the Department of Justice announced the establishment of an Independent Review into Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland to be conducted with recommendations for the Minister of Justice.

The completed [Review of Hate Crime Legislation](#) was completed and presented to Justice Minister Naomi Long MLA on 30 November 2020.

Rural Community Network provided a response to the Independent Review which can be read on our website - [here](#)

Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document

The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs published a Discussion Document in November in advance of the development of a Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Document sets out a range of evidence and research on current levels of air pollution as well as the current policy, legislation and measures used to control air pollution. The Discussion Document includes chapters on Transport, Household and Industrial emissions. It also includes a chapter on Agricultural emissions, the main source of ammonia pollution derived from the handling, storage and spreading of animal manure. Northern Ireland emissions of ammonia in 2017 made up 11% of the UK's total ammonia emissions despite only having 2.8% of the UK population and 5.9% of total UK land area. This reflects the size of our agricultural sector and the intensive nature of much of our livestock production for export markets.

You can read the discussion document [here](#) and the consultation closes on 15th February 2021 at 17.00.

Social Inclusion Strategies

In September 2020 Communities Minister Carál NíChuilín announced the start of work on a suite of Social Inclusion Strategies. The Minister stated that a process to develop new Anti-Poverty, Disability and Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation strategies aimed to address barriers and inequalities in society and would fulfil commitments made in the New Decade New Approach document. She went on to say that she hoped all these strategies would be published before the end of 2021 subject to Executive Agreement. Each strategy will be developed using co-design principles and will include an Expert Advisory Panel, a Co-Design Working Group and a Cross-Departmental Working Group.