

Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Response to the Consultation by Rural Community Network

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March 2021

Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for, and support to, rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN is a membership organisation with 250 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Response to the Consultation

Rural Community Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation. RCN hosted a workshop with TEO officials and rural stakeholders on 24th February 2021 which helped inform this consultation response. Our response is also informed by comments from our member groups.

Gaps in the Programme for Government Outcomes Framework?

RCN strongly believes that an outcome should be included that states the ambition that all citizens should have access to secure, affordable and warm housing appropriate to their needs whatever their age. Decent housing is fundamental to health and well-being. The inclusion of an outcome on housing in the PfG was a specific commitment in the New Decade New Approach agreement.

RCN also believes that an outcome on effective governance should be included in the PfG. Several commitments in New Decade New Approach to reforming Assembly structure and mechanisms to make them more effective. All community and voluntary organisations include a similar aim in their strategies and plans. The inclusion of an outcome on effective governance may give the public more confidence that politicians are serious about making the Assembly work well for everyone and will provide a benchmark to measure progress. The last PfG was

obstructed by the absence of the Assembly for almost three years. We believe that the PfG should contain a statement from all Executive parties re-committing to addressing political difference through political institutions. This could be underpinned by commitments on open data, citizen engagement and the introduction of a duty to collaborate both across Executive Departments and local government.

RCN believes design ideas could be used to shift NI Departments to a more collaborative style of working. The current structure of NI Executive Departments does not lead to effective cross Departmental working. The challenge for the Executive is to make that shift within the current structures that they have so far been unable to achieve.

RCN believes that Racism should be referenced as an issue to be addressed as well as sectarianism under the outcome *We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect.*

Our Children and Young People have the best start in Life.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

Access to education is an issue in rural communities. Rationalisation of schools (especially primary schools) has happened within various educational sectors rather than using a true area-based approach to ensure rural children can access a quality primary school close to where they live. Access to post primary education also needs a true area-based approach. Duplication of resources across too many sectors has led to too many schools which need critical investment and re-development of their school buildings.

Remote learning which had to be expanded rapidly due to school closures caused by the pandemic may have a role in facilitating pupils in some smaller post primary schools in remoter parts of Northern Ireland full access to the Entitlement Framework.

Capability and resilience in children and young people is not solely developed through team sports and cross community activities. Many young people participate in a wide range of activities that develop capability and resilience and reference should be made to the arts, music, environmental, volunteering and other activities.

The early years priority is of critical importance in many rural communities where, for too many families, access to high quality, affordable childcare is non-existent. The priority should also recognise the growing problem of child poverty in working households due to low pay and “flexible” employment models.

We Live and Work Sustainably Protecting the Environment

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

The pandemic has shown the range of jobs that can be done from home without any loss in productivity. This has huge potential for reducing commuting and carbon emissions as well as revitalising rural communities and developing rural businesses. It has also demonstrated the importance of affordable and reliable broadband connectivity.

RCN believes housing, including development of new housing and refurbishment and retention of existing stock should stand alone as an additional PfG outcome.

The priorities of protecting the natural environment, developing the green economy, waste management and Water/Wastewater management have huge implications for rural communities and for farming and food production. Transformational change is required in the next decade that will require fundamental changes in farming. This will be a huge task for political leadership in NI.

Additional investment in water/wastewater infrastructure is required across many towns and villages in rural NI to enable any further development of housing.

We have an Equal and Inclusive Society Where Everyone is Valued and Treated with Respect

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

We welcome the acknowledgment of the need to provide support in relation to welfare and poverty in rural communities. Government needs to ensure that a distinctly rural approach is taken to address poverty and welfare in rural communities, in accordance with the Rural Needs Act.

The emerging evidence has shown that women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as they have been more likely to have been furloughed or lost their job. Women are over-represented in sectors of the economy that have been heavily impacted by the pandemic such as hospitality and retail and have continued to undertake a majority of home schooling and other caring work in families. Supporting women's re-inclusion in the workforce and tackling discrimination should be identified as a key priority area underpinned by the delivery of affordable and accessible childcare across rural NI.

We welcome the inclusion of Rights and Equality as a key priority area and believe that the implementation of a Bill of Rights for NI should be a priority key action shaped by the findings of the Ad-Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights established by the New Decade New Approach agreement.

The Tackling Sectarianism, Building Respect and Identity priority should also refer to the need to tackle racism in NI. This priority area should also refer to the rights of individuals to cultural expression.

RCN will offer further comment on actions and targets proposed when the Outcomes Framework has been agreed.

We all enjoy long, healthy active lives.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

The stress the pandemic has placed on health services and the waiting lists for treatment that have gotten even longer in the past year highlight the importance of investment in and reconfiguration of health services in NI. Providing the right services where they are needed and ensuring rural citizens can access them should become a cross departmental priority. The relocation of hospital services will need to take place in a way that commands the support of the public. Ensuring that health services are improved and are delivering better outcomes and that they can be accessed by rural citizens is key to the public accepting transformational change.

The importance of Mental health and wellbeing services has been highlighted by the pandemic and ensuring equality of access to people across NI regardless of where they live will be a challenge.

Emerging from the pandemic may provide opportunities for communities to reassess the role they can play in their approach to public health. Attempting to seriously address health inequalities must be underpinned by investment in public health and approaches such as social prescribing.

Everyone Can Reach Their Potential

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

As NI seeks to rebuild the economy post pandemic the Executive needs to reinvest in retraining and reskilling across all age groups. Adult education and training has suffered disinvestment over the past decade and will need new levels of investment to build skills and allow adults to retrain, whatever stage of their career.

Underachievement continues to be reinforced by academic selection. Until the Executive can agree a way forward this structural problem will continue to hamper the development of too many young people with knock on effects in the wider economy and society.

We support the Executive ambition towards better jobs and believe this needs to involve the development and promotion of jobs in the green economy to meet carbon reduction targets and protect the environment. We note that the indicator to measure progress on Better Jobs in the previous PfG, "A better jobs index" is still under construction.

Community wealth building models should be used to support the development of a regionally balanced economy using successful examples from across the world.

Our Economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon neutral.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

RCN strongly supports the need for more regionally balanced and inclusive economic growth. The impact of EU exit and economic recovery post Covid pandemic are massive challenges.

To enable NI to deal with the outworking of EU Exit and the Protocol and develop a globally competitive economy will necessitate maintaining constructive working relationships with the EU, even if these relationships are strained, they must still be made to work to reduce (as far as possible) barriers to trade put in place by the protocol and Brexit. Relationships both North South and East West must be maintained and developed as set out in the Good Friday Agreement if the NI economy is to thrive.

RCN largely agrees that the key priority areas outlined under this outcome in the draft PfG outcomes framework. A further key priority area is to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are more evenly distributed. This would align this outcome with the *We have an Equal and Inclusive Society Where Everyone is Valued and Treated with Respect* outcome.

The agri food industry is of huge significance to rural communities, particularly farmers. Whilst we agree with its inclusion as a key priority area our view is that increasing intensification further will cause serious environmental deterioration. Transformational change is required in the next decade that will require fundamental changes in farming. This will be a huge task for political leadership in NI.

We strongly support the need to develop our digital, energy and physical infrastructure. As stated earlier the development of digital infrastructure has significant potential to allow workers to work remotely, reduce commuting and contribute to carbon reduction.

Everyone Feels Safe – we all respect the law and each other.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified. We wish to add the following comments:

RCN believes that there is a need for the PSNI to focus on re-building relationships across the community and adopt a more community-based focus to policing rather than a response policing focus.

A priority area should be to ensure effective and practical cross border co-operation between the respective criminal justice systems North and South of the border.

We believe that the outcome should include an additional commitment to support the victims of ordinary crime.

We have a Caring Society that supports people throughout their lives.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified - several of these are duplicated under other outcomes. We wish to add the following comments:

RCN believes there needs to be specific reference to support for carers and the crucial role they play in society as the care they provide (mostly provided by women) is hugely under-valued. RCN will comment further on actions and action plans identified under this Outcome in the next stage of development of the PfG.

People want to live, work, and visit here.

RCN acknowledges the importance of the Outcome and the key priority areas identified - several of these are duplicated under other outcomes. We wish to add the following comment:

RCN welcomes the key priority area on growth to stimulate investments across Northern Ireland and supporting sustainable development of rural industries, including increased digital access.