

**JULY 2021**



**Rural  
Community  
Network**

## **DAERA consultation on Rural Policy Framework**

DAERA opened its consultation on its Rural Policy Framework on 7<sup>th</sup> July. The Rural Policy Framework will replace the Priority 6 element of the EU funded NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2014-2020 which was largely distributed by Local Action Groups (LAGs) using the LEADER approach. This programme distributed funding of around £80 million in rural communities since 2014. The Rural Policy Framework has been developed with a range of rural stakeholders, representatives from Assembly Departments and local government. The Framework sets out a range of priority areas for intervention under 5 thematic pillars:

- Innovation and Entrepreneurship
- Sustainable Tourism
- Health and Wellbeing
- Employment
- Connectivity

As part of the consultation the Department is running a series of virtual engagement events during July and August to give an overview of the work it has undertaken to date in the development of the draft Rural Policy Framework and to hear stakeholder views.

The consultation documents, Rural Needs Impact Assessment and information on registration for the virtual engagement events is available [here](#)

**The deadline for responses to the consultation is **Monday 6<sup>th</sup> September.****

## AERA Committee Call for Evidence on the Climate Change Bill

The Climate Change Bill which is a Private Members' Bill developed by Climate Action NI and sponsored by a cross party group of MLAs passed its second reading in the Assembly on 10 May (a record of the second reading debate can be read [here](#)). The Bill is now at Committee stage where the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee is considering it in detail as well as taking evidence from expert witnesses. The AERA Committee is asking stakeholders and the public for their views on the Bill as part of its Call for Evidence.

RCN has developed a draft response which we will be available on our website [here](#) when finalised.

For further information on the Committee Inquiry and to make your own response click on the following link [here](#).

**The Committee's call for evidence closes on 15<sup>th</sup> July.**

## DfC Call for Evidence on Housing Supply Strategy

The Department for Communities has issued a call for evidence to support the development of a Housing Supply Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Call for Evidence has emerged from the statement given by the then Communities Minister Carál NíChuilín on [Housing Policy](#) to the Assembly in November 2020. The Call for Evidence asks questions on a broad range of issues including land and property, planning, finance, infrastructure, climate change, innovation and skills. The consultation is seeking evidence related to housing across all tenures. RCN's response to the consultation focused on issues in relation to planning, fuel poverty and the need for more social and affordable housing options in rural towns and villages. Our response to the consultation will be available on the RCN website [here](#) when it has been finalised.

**The call for evidence closes on 16 July. If you are interested in making a response click [here](#).**

## Report finds Personal Independence Payment “Maladministration”

A recent report by the Public Services Ombudsman Margaret Kelly has found that too many people who had applied for Personal Independence Payment were “unfairly rejected”. Personal Independence Payment replaced Disability Living Allowance in 2016 as the main benefit to support people living with disabilities. The report found that too many people had their claims unfairly rejected and that claimants were “kept in the dark” by the PIP process by both Capita, the company who assesses claimants, and the Department for Communities. The full Ombudsman’s report and a summary can be read [here](#). The Minister for Communities Deirdre Hargey, in response to the report said she was:

*“Firmly committed to enacting positive change in PIP delivery”.*

The report comes a few months after another damning investigation into PIP by the NI Audit Office in March which can be read [here](#).

These reports back up what independent advice providers and individual claimants have been saying for years. The effect of the move from DLA to PIP has made it more difficult for claimants to access their social security benefits. The PIP application is difficult to complete as medical evidence is not sought or properly taken account of and vulnerable people must fight tooth and nail to secure the benefits they are entitled to.

The Participation and Practice of Rights Project (PPR) has worked with claimants to develop a human rights checklist for decision makers implementing social security in NI. The People’s Proposal asks that social security decisions are made in a way that ends conscious cruelty and protects claimant’s basic rights. PPR has also called for the PIP assessment contract with Capita to be terminated.

You can read more about PPR’s work on the Right to Work Right to Income campaign [here](#)

## RCN response to the Energy Strategy NI Consultation on Policy Options

RCN has responded to the Department for the Economy consultation on policy options for an Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Vision set out by the strategy is for Net Zero Carbon and affordable energy. The document sets out a wide range of policy options in relation to further de-carbonising our Energy generation, replacing fossil fuels with indigenous renewables, growing a green economy and placing people at the heart of our energy future. RCN's response highlighted issues in relation to:

- Fuel poverty and the need for retro fitting of rural homes.
- The needs of rural citizens around transport and mobility and how public and active transport can facilitate transport for rural citizens.
- The need to ensure a just transition to ensure rural citizens living on low or moderate incomes are supported to make the changes required so the net zero carbon energy target can be met.

Our response to the consultation can be read [here](#).

## RCN response to AWB consultation

RCN has responded to Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Poots consultation on proposals to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB). The AWB is a non-departmental public body of DAERA. It is comprised of 3 independent members appointed by the Minister (one of whom is appointed as Chair), 6 representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union and 6 representatives from Unite the Union.

The AWB sets pay rates and other terms and conditions for agricultural workers in Northern Ireland. The Minister is proposing abolition of the AWB as his view is that agricultural workers are now protected by the National Minimum Wage and the AWB structure leads to additional bureaucracy for employers. RCN does not support the Minister's proposal as it will, in effect, reduce wage rates for younger workers in the industry significantly which will deter young people from entering agriculture. It also will remove entitlement to overtime pay rates, sick pay and holiday entitlement. There are no guarantees that these conditions will be retained by employers if the AWB is abolished. The proposals will also impact on seasonal migrant workers who are some of the most vulnerable workers in rural communities and who are less likely to feel they can assert their employment rights.

To read our response to the consultation click [here](#).

## Climate Change Bill (No. 2) First Reading

You may remember from our Policy Link in January that Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Poots was in the process of developing proposals of his own for a Climate Change Bill for NI. As the Private Members' Bill on Climate Change has proceeded through the second stage debate and is now at Committee Stage (see page 2 of Policy Link) the Minister's own bill was still awaiting Executive approval. Approval for the Minister's Climate Change (No. 2) Bill was given at the Executive meeting on 24 June. The Bill received its first reading in the Assembly on 5 July (first reading is a very quick formality which introduces the Bill to the Assembly there is no debate at this stage). The Hansard link is [here](#).

This means that there is a possibility that there will be two Climate Change Bills passing through the legislative process in the coming months. This will provide a significant workload for the AERA Committee on top of the work it is already involved in scrutinising legislation related to Brexit. The Minister's Bill sets a target for an 82% cut in carbon in NI by 2050 rather than the net Zero target set for 2045 by the Private Members' Bill.

## Minister Swann announces Updated Mental Health Strategy for NI

Health Minister Robin Swann announced an updated 10 Year Mental Health Strategy for NI last week following a public consultation on the draft strategy earlier this year. RCN responded to the consultation on the draft strategy back in March and our response can be read [here](#).

Minister Swann in announcing the strategy acknowledged that demand on mental health services is predicted to rise significantly due to the pandemic. He stated that the Department would need an extra £1.2 billion over the lifetime of the Strategy to implement all the recommendations. The Strategy sets out 35 actions which include:

- An increase in the proportion of funding directed towards the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) to 10% of the adult mental health services budget.
- A greater focus on the provision of mental health services in the community.
- The development of a single mental health service by creating enhanced regional co-operation and consistency.

One of the key messages in our consultation response was the need to ensure regional consistency in the provision of mental health services right across Northern Ireland regardless of where you live. This was informed by work undertaken by PPR's 123GP Campaign which showed a postcode lottery exists in access to GP based counselling services. Provision in the Western and Southern Health Trust regions is much lower than in other Health Trusts click [here](#) for PPR's blog explaining this. The Strategy states that "therapy hubs" are to be expanded to ensure NI wide coverage, which is to be welcomed, although whether the funding is available to meet the level of need is debatable. There is no mention in the Strategy of GP based counselling provision which is a concern. We know from our most recent member group survey that health issues in rural communities and access to mental health services is an urgent priority for many of our members.

The NI Mental Health Strategy can be read [here](#).



## RCN's Response to the Peace PLUS Consultation

RCN responded to the SEUPB Consultation on the forthcoming Peace PLUS programme back in May. Peace PLUS will distribute €1 billion 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 asked for stakeholders' views on the broad themes and indicative investment areas the Programme is proposing to deliver.

Our consultation response welcomed the inclusion of a small grants strand for grass roots groups as the nature of Peace IV excluded many of these groups. We welcomed the funding strand to promote development of shared space in local communities. We stated our concern that SEUPB needs to ensure all local councils are developing peace action plans using co-design principles and that these plans needed to address more contentious issues.

We support the proposal for funding to be allocated to the development of digital clusters but stated that these need to prioritise community owned models to ensure resources generated are retained within local communities rather than extracted as private profit.

RCN strongly supported the inclusion of a Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion strand to support social, economic, and environmental projects and restated our view that the actions under this strand need to embed investment in community owned organisations across the programme area.

Our response to the consultation also called for additional funding to be re-allocated towards measures to support projects with victims and survivors of the conflict.

You can read our response to the consultation [here](#).

## DAERA consultation on NI Peatland Strategy 2021-2040

DAERA is currently consulting on a NI Peatland Strategy 2021-2040. The Strategy identifies the ecosystem services provided by healthy peatlands, including climate regulation and adaptation, specialised biodiversity, good water quality and flood alleviation. It acknowledges that most of our peatlands have been damaged to some degree, are in poor condition and will require more sustainable management and restoration. Peatlands are a globally important habitat for biodiversity and healthy peatlands are carbon sinks with peatland restoration and re-wetting now recognised as a nature-based solution to climate change. Semi-natural peatlands represent the largest single store of global soil carbon and have a greater density of stored carbon than any other ecosystem. The restoration and conservation of peatland will be crucial in protecting biodiversity but also in helping NI to meet its Climate Change targets.

The vision of the Strategy is:

*“to ensure that all semi-natural peatlands are protected, managed and where possible, prioritised for restoration, so that they can maintain their natural functions, biodiversity and ecosystem services.”*

It sets out a range of priority actions under 6 strategic objectives:

- Conserve peatlands and prevent degradation.
- Restoration of degraded areas to functioning peatland ecosystems.
- Supporting Sustainable Peatland Management.
- Knowledge Sharing and Research.
- Communication, Education and Access.
- Governance, Implementation and Funding.

**The consultation can be accessed [here](#) and the deadline for responses is **9<sup>th</sup> September 2021**.**

## Conor Murphy Announces new Social Value Procurement Policy

Finance Minister, Conor Murphy announced a new policy on 5<sup>th</sup> July which will see mandatory scoring of social value within public procurement contracts.

The new policy which has been agreed by the Executive, states that that from June 2022, tenders must include a minimum of 10% of total award criteria to social value. This will apply to service contracts valued above £123,000 and construction contracts valued above £4.7 million. This will account for approximately 97% of total government procurement spend. The minimum weighting will increase to 20% from June 2023 subject to review and approval by the Executive. The NI Executive spends approximately £3 billion per annum on goods, services and construction. The new policy means that social enterprises will have additional recognition in the procurement process for the social outcomes and value that their contract bids could create. The policy also states that private sector companies bidding for public contracts must pay the National Living Wage to its workers. The policy is the culmination of many years of lobbying by Social Enterprise NI and others in the social enterprise sector.

For the last 4 years, RCN has been working with our partners Rose Regeneration in helping community groups measure their social value by using the Social Value Engine <https://www.socialvalueengine.com>. This is an online tool that systemises the process of measuring social value and helps organisations to forecast, plan and evaluate activities and projects. It is only one of two online tools that has been accredited by Social Value UK and was developed as a response to the Public Services (Social Value Act 2012) that exists in England.

To date, we have assisted 25 organisations in using the tool and have recent completely commissioned work from the Department of Communities, DAERA and Public Health Agency. To find out more about this work, contact Conor either by email [conor@ruralcommunitynetwork.org](mailto:conor@ruralcommunitynetwork.org) or telephone 07725 030295.

## Private Tenancies Bill Introduced by Deirdre Hargey

A new [Private Tenancies Bill](#) was introduced by Deirdre Hargey in the Assembly on 6<sup>th</sup> July. She said:

*“Private renters should have access to a good quality, affordable homes (sic) with peace of mind over the length and conditions of their rental contract.”*

The private rented sector is now similar in size to the social housing sector. It’s particularly important in rural communities where, often, it is the only option due to the lack of social housing in many areas. RCN has been campaigning with our Rural Residents’ Forum since 2016 to raise awareness about the need for more social housing in rural communities as the target set by the Housing Executive in rural areas has been missed in 6 out of the last 7 years.

Nearly half of those in the private rented sector are in receipt of some element of housing support, either through Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. In 2019/20, over £270 million pounds was paid out in Housing Benefit and Universal Credit costs to the private rented sector. Some of the protections for tenants set out in the Bill include:

- Tenancies longer than 12 months but less than 10 years will require a minimum 8 weeks’ notice to quit.
- Landlords will be required to ensure working fire and carbon monoxide alarms in their properties.
- A restriction in rent increases which would prevent rent from increasing more than once a year.