

NOVEMBER 2021



Rural Policy Framework consultation

RCN responded to DAERA's consultation on the draft Rural Policy Framework (RPF) at the end of August. The RPF will replace the Rural Development Programme which was previously partly funded by the EU. The RPF was developed between summer 2019 and January 2020 by several working groups but publication of the draft RPF was delayed due to the pandemic. The RPF is a broad framework document which sets out key themes and issues in rural communities under the following areas:

- Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship
- Rural Tourism
- Rural Health and Social Wellbeing
- Rural Employment
- Connectivity

The consultation responses are being considered and the Department will bring forward a final RPF for approval. The draft RPF can be read [here](#). RCN welcomed the publication of the draft RPF and raised issues about the need to support social and affordable housing in rural communities. We also highlighted the need to support rural community infrastructure across NI which will be essential to the success of any rural development work the Department is engaged in. Our response raised our concern that the UK government has yet to announce details on how any replacement funding for rural development will be allocated to the devolved administrations.

RCN's response to the consultation can be read [here](#).

Climate Change Bill #1 Call for Evidence

As discussed in the last edition of Policy link we now have 2 Climate Change Bills passing through the legislative process at the Assembly. Both bills have been subject to a call for evidence from the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee to help inform the Committee's deliberations on the Bills. RCN responded to the Call for Evidence in June on the Private Member's Bill sponsored by Claire Bailey MLA which has become known as Climate Change Bill No.1. Climate Change Bill No. 1's key proposals include setting a target for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, establishing an independent office of a Climate Commissioner to oversee progress and establish a framework for five-year plans to implement emissions cuts. The Bill does not set specific emissions reduction targets for individual sectors such as farming, transport or energy but proposes that these targets are set by individual Stormont departments in consultation with stakeholders and the public.

This bill has been strongly opposed by the AERA Minister Edwin Poots MLA and by the Ulster Farmers' Union both of whom have expressed concern that a net zero target for greenhouse gas emissions in NI is unachievable without significant reduction in the numbers of livestock here which they insist will impact the viability of many smaller beef and sheep farmers. RCN's response to the Call for Evidence on Climate Change Bill No1 can be accessed [here](#).

Climate Change Bill #2 Call for Evidence

As the AERA Committee Call for Evidence on Climate Change Bill No. 1 was closing Minister Poots introduced his own proposals for a Climate Change Bill to the Assembly. This has been dubbed Climate Change Bill No. 2 and it's the first time two bills addressing the same issue have been introduced to the NI Assembly simultaneously. The fundamental difference between the Minister's Bill and the Bill sponsored by Clare Bailey is that it sets a lower target for reducing emissions. The Minister's Bill sets a target of an 82% reduction by 2050. The Minister argues that this target has been identified by the UK Climate Change Committee as the appropriate contribution by NI to the overall net zero target for the UK. This Bill also aims to establish a system of carbon budgeting that will set maximum greenhouse gas emissions levels over specific time periods to achieve interim and overall targets included in the Bill.

In our response to the Call for Evidence we welcomed the fact that the specific issues around climate change in NI are finally being given consideration and that legislation should pass in this Assembly mandate. However, we questioned whether the establishment of a target for net reduction in GHG emissions of 82% is achievable by 2050 without a matching commitment by government to fund measures that will support people and businesses to make a just transition. The UK CCC published a report in June stating that despite the ambition of the UK Government to aim for net zero carbon by 2050 the policies needed to meet that ambitious target are lagging way behind (CCC report available [here](#)). We highlighted the need for strong political leadership to deliver what will be a transformation for our society. Our response also pointed to the need for much wider and deeper engagement with individual citizens, communities and businesses to develop our collective understanding of what moving to a net zero carbon society will mean.

For a detailed assessment of the differences between the two Climate Change bills prepared by the NI Assembly Research and Information Service click [here](#).

NI Peatland Strategy Consultation

In a busy period for consultations DAERA also sought views on its new Peatland Strategy. The consultation closed in September but the draft strategy is available [here](#). The Peatland Strategy sets out some of the ecosystem services provided by peatlands, acknowledges that many of our peatlands have been damaged or degraded and identifies potential actions for restoration and management of peatlands in NI. The Strategy sets out a range of priorities under the following strategic objectives:

- Conserve peatlands & prevent degradation
- Restoration of degraded areas to functioning peatland ecosystems (designated & non-designated sites)
- Supporting Sustainable Peatland Management
- Knowledge Sharing & Research
- Communication, Education & Access
- Governance, Implementation & Funding

In our response to the consultation, we pointed out that there is an urgent need to build greater awareness of the important role of peatland in addressing climate change and how restored peatland can sequester carbon. Managed access to peatlands for recreation and education should be part of this awareness raising process and should be done in partnership with rural communities. RCN supports the need to deliver peatland restoration projects in partnership with local communities.

One of the priorities identified by the draft Strategy is the completion of a review and key issues paper on commercial peat extraction, turbarry rights and the use of peat in horticulture. This may quantify the extent of these issues and their effects on peatland biodiversity and ecosystem function, but they will not necessarily address the issues.

Low-income households in rural areas still use peat as a fuel due to the high rates of fuel poverty in many rural communities. Turbarry rights have the potential to become a contested issue in NI as they have in some rural communities in the Republic of Ireland. If the wider issue of fuel poverty in rural communities can be addressed through better insulation and low/zero carbon heating systems, then the potential removal of turbarry rights could become a less

controversial issue in rural communities. Future proposals to phase out commercial extraction of peat for horticulture will need to be subsidised with an exit scheme or commercial extractors offered incentives to retrain in conservation and peatland management as an alternative. Again, these approaches require careful thought and engagement to minimise conflict that could be caused.

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

Planning Advice Note on PPS21 Withdrawn

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) has withdrawn a Planning Advice Note (PAN) *'Implementation of Strategic Planning Policy on Development in the Countryside'* which it had issued in August. The purpose of the PAN was to issue advice to Councils on the implementation and interpretation of Planning Policy Statement 21 which sets out planning policy for development of housing in the countryside. The Department originally stated that this was not a change of planning policy but was a clarification and guidance to Councils on how the Policy should be interpreted. A statement from DfI said:

"The Department had not expected such a significant response to what is essentially an advice note to support the efficient and effective workings of the two-tier planning system.

Regrettably, rather than bringing certainty and clarity, as was its intention, the PAN seems to have created confusion and uncertainty. The Department has listened carefully to and reflected on all the concerns and has decided to withdraw the PAN today to swiftly restore clarity to this situation...The Department will now take stock of the concerns raised and undertake further engagement and analysis on this important policy area, to include consideration of current and emerging issues, such as the climate emergency and a green recovery from this pandemic."

Click [here](#) to read the Department's statement in full.

Charities Bill Call for Evidence

The Communities Committee issued a call for evidence on the Charities Bill which closed at the start of September. The Charities Bill was introduced to clarify legislation on the operation of the NI Charity Commission in light of the McBride Judgement of 2019 and subsequent Court of Appeal Judgement. The Court of Appeal dismissed an Appeal by the Charity Commission against the McBride Judgment – which meant over 7000 decisions, orders and directions made by Charity Commission staff were deemed unlawful. Although this had no immediate impact on charities the legislation is being progressed to ensure that previous decisions taken by Charity Commission staff are deemed lawful and to set out in detail the decisions and actions of the Charity Commission that can be delegated to staff and those that must be taken by Charity Commissioners.

RCN made a response to the Call for Evidence, and we also presented evidence to the Communities Committee on 23rd September. Our response welcomed the intention of the Bill to make most decisions taken by Commission staff lawful which, if the Bill is enacted, will mean that those charities who have already gone through the registration process are "deemed" registered and that any changes sought by charities from the Commission in their purposes since their registration will also be accepted as lawful. We also supported the Bill's intention to introduce a registration threshold using regulations. This would mean that smaller charities whose income and/or assets fell under a certain threshold could be exempt from the Charity Registration process if they wished.

RCN's response to the Call for Evidence which can be read [here](#).

NI Welfare Mitigations Package loopholes yet to be addressed

The £20 uplift in Universal Credit which was introduced by the UK Government at the start of the pandemic was removed from UC recipients at the end of September despite concerted campaigning by anti-poverty charities across the UK and significant media coverage. Meanwhile the Cliff Edge Coalition NI (a group of over 70 NGOs and charities in NI) are continuing to campaign for the NI Executive to progress legislation to close loopholes in the Welfare Mitigations Package. Currently over 360 households are unprotected from the bedroom tax and 900 families with children are unprotected from the benefit cap.

The New Decade New Approach agreement which was the basis for the restoration of Stormont in January 2019 committed to addressing these loopholes. Legislation has been drafted and funding allocated since April 2021 but despite repeated attempts by Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey to table this at the Executive there has been no Executive approval. In a Twitter exchange earlier this month between Cliff Edge Coalition member Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick and Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, Ms. O'Neill stated that the DUP was blocking the legislation by refusing to allow it to be added to the agenda of the Executive's weekly meeting:



You can follow the Cliff Edge Coalition on Twitter at @CliffEdgeNI

NIHE Rural Housing Strategy

The Housing Executive has recently consulted on its Rural Housing Strategy 2021-2025. The Reaching Rural Strategy sets out what the Executive aims to do in rural communities in Northern Ireland to manage and maintain its current stock, provide services to tenants, identify housing need in rural communities and address homelessness. The Strategy can be read [here](#). The Strategy identifies a range of priorities under three themes:

- Supporting our rural customers
- Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes
- Securing the future of our rural communities

The Rural Residents' Forum response to the consultation highlighted the need for the Housing Executive to continue to work to address the shortfall in the provision of new build social housing in rural communities and to support the development of affordable housing. We also questioned how the Housing Executive can support work to increase energy efficiency in rural housing and phase out the reliance on carbon-based heating systems in rural areas. These are identified as priorities but will require massive investment over the coming decades that will add further to the Housing Executive's maintenance and repair backlog. The scale of investment required will need to be supported by funding from the Westminster Government as part of plans to tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions.

The Rural Residents' Forum response to the consultation can be read [here](#)

Pilot project has implications for fuel poverty in rural areas

The [Handiheat project](#) held its final conference in September to share learning from its work on fuel poverty and the need for energy transition in home heating in rural communities. The Housing Executive and our friends at the ground-breaking ARC Healthy Living Centre in Irvinestown were the Northern Ireland partners on the project which was funded by the EU Northern Peripheries Programme.

The pilot project involved upgrading insulation and installation of air source heat pumps and solar photovoltaic panels in 6 Housing Executive properties in Irvinestown. The emerging findings from the pilot were that energy efficiency is the first issue that needs to be addressed. Improvements to the fabric of homes including upgraded cavity wall and loft insulation, better double glazing, and draught proofing were the most cost-effective steps to take. Access to low carbon heating technology and retro fitting will be beyond the means of low-income households and will need considerable subsidy from government. The most important message from the conference was that technology, on its own, will not be enough to address rural fuel poverty. It will require remedial measures in homes such as better insulation and draught proofing, the use of low carbon technologies as well as advice and support for households.

The Handiheat project final conference can be viewed on YouTube [here](#)

Digital Inclusion in Rural NI

In this article Nigel McKinney reflects on issues of digital inclusion, connectivity and rural communities.

Working for RCN since February 2021 on the 5G New Thinking project I've started to become more familiar with the world of digital connectivity, 5G, bits and bytes, digital exclusion and the range of work taking place but it's still a confusing and complicated world.

Government and policy makers recognise how essential digital connectivity is and Project Stratum especially will be of huge benefit to rural dwellers and communities here. However, if you are a consumer with less-than-optimal connectivity it is difficult to get up to date and clear information on the various options open to you for improvements. There is a need to bring the support options available to consumers together in one place. There is confusion between the role of Fibrus in rolling out Project Stratum and the separate role of Fibrus as an internet service provider itself. Greater clarification must be provided to consumers on the distinction and also on what Project Stratum is putting in place.

Who would have thought it – but the ongoing work of laying the new fibre optic cable through Project Stratum, led by the Department for the Economy and delivered on the ground by Fibrus and its contractors is hugely exciting? Many of us are waiting for the new cable now laid across large parts of rural Northern Ireland to reach our houses and then for new and faster connections to be provided. However, some anomalies are arising with some properties identified as ineligible for connection whereas neighbouring properties are, what also of households where the cable passes who have just good enough connectivity but would wish for better – can we not foresee arrangements to allow them to connect?

The impact of the pandemic and our response to it as individuals, organisations and wider society is a strategic moment to think about our future digital strategy. How can rural VCSEs develop appropriate digital strategies and consider how they can do more and do better using digital technology alongside the more traditional face to face service delivery?

How might policymakers act to support rural regeneration and development building on the necessity and appetite for more flexible and remote working? Despite all the interventions taking place to enhance connectivity – what will be done about any remaining “not spots” - how can the infrastructure being laid through Project Stratum and the Full Fibre NI initiative – which is connecting public sector buildings with gigabit capable fibre – be used to reach into and further enhance connectivity in those areas?

Finally, if the infrastructure intervention by government, and other interventions by telecoms companies will largely solve the technical connectivity issue – the linked and often hidden issue of digital exclusion must come to the fore. That digital exclusion isn’t only a factor of lack of connection/service but also due to cost of connection/data, cost of devices and a lack of confidence and knowledge to use devices and applications.

It isn’t good enough to switch to online services and expect adoption, there is a need and opportunity to consider the issues in the round and to invest in a range of actions to ensure people aren’t left behind.

Future Planning Model for Integrated Care System

RCN responded to the Department of Health consultation on the Future Planning Model for an Integrated Care System which can be read [here](#). The consultation sets out delivery structures for a new Integrated Care System (ICS) model in NI, whereby local providers and communities would come together to plan, manage and deliver care for their local catchments based on a population health approach.

The model will establish a Regional Group that will support the initial establishment of Area Integrated Partnership Boards (AIPBs) and put in place robust governance and accountability arrangements with AIPBs. The Regional Group will also plan, manage and co-ordinate the delivery of regional and specialist services.

The AIPBs will have responsibility for overseeing the work of the integrated care partnership in its area and the governance of all affiliated structures. Locality level structures will be established to support the work of the AIPB. The exact number and role of the groups at this level will be determined by the AIPB. However, they will be based around existing GP Federations and Integrated Care Partnership areas and should also align and integrate with local Council structures (Community Planning Partnerships) and boundaries where possible. Community level structures will also be determined by each AIPB. The number, size, and area(s) covered should reflect the most appropriate structure for each locality and could be based around local or individual GP practices, community pharmacies or local community groups or organisations.

RCN's response to the consultation raised issues around how services commissioned by this model would be assessed for rural needs impact and how workforce issues in health and social care would be addressed. We also pointed out the importance of community engagement at all levels of the model and the need to ensure that health inequalities are addressed through NI Executive interventions on social security, childcare, employment, housing and women's health.

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

Protection from Stalking Bill

The [Protection from Stalking Bill](#), which was first introduced by the Justice Minister on 18th January 2021, continues to progress through the Assembly. The Committee Stage should finish soon, and it is hoped that the Bill will then be able to progress through to Royal Assent before this mandate ends in May 2022.

Several members of the Women's Policy Group submitted [joint evidence](#) to the Justice Committee on the 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 primary research was undertaken 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 our 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,*
- *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.*

Rachel Powell and Elaine Croy from the Women's Resource and Development Agency then presented [Oral Evidence](#) to the Committee on these findings in May 2021. This evidence submission put the voices of victims at the core. It covered 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.

As male violence against women continues to rise in Northern Ireland, with eleven women being murdered since March 2020, it is crucial that all forms of gendered abuse are incorporated into a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, including stalking. There is a strong correlation between stalking, domestic abuse and

femicide, and a lot of work is needed across our society to educate people on the seriousness and prevalence of stalking in Northern Ireland.

Rachel Woods MLA, (Green Party NI) has also introduced her Safe Leave Private Members' Bill, which would provide paid leave for victims of domestic abuse. Hopefully all parties can work together to ensure these vital Bills can progress before the end of this Assembly term to provide victims and survivors the protections and access to justice they deserve.

Rachel Powell Women's Sector Lobbyist WRDA

Safe Access Zones Bill

Green Party Northern Ireland Party Leader, Clare Bailey's [Safe Access Zone Private Member's Bill](#) recently passed the Second Stage in the Northern Ireland Assembly on 12th October 2021 (full debate and official report can be viewed [here](#)). The Safe Access Zones PMB will require the Department of Health to make provision for and establish safe access zones for premises providing abortion services. Acts within a safe access zone which may have the effect of preventing or impeding access to premises, or influencing, harassing, alarming or distressing persons accessing the premises, will be criminalised.

Clare Bailey described the Bill as:

“a response to what I witnessed and experienced during my time as a volunteer at the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast city centre... What is happening on our streets is a very deliberate campaign of harassment and intimidation against women.”

This Bill has received cross party support across most political parties with the SDLP, Sinn Féin, UUP, PBP and Alliance all supporting the Bill with the DUP and TUV opposing. The Bill will now progress to Committee Stage for further discussion and legislative scrutiny, and despite the huge legislative backlog in the Assembly, it is hoped that the legislation for this Bill can pass through all stages before the end of this mandate in May 2022.

The harassment and targeted abuse towards women and pregnant people and healthcare staff accessing reproductive healthcare facilities has been a growing issue for many years in Northern Ireland, something widely [documented](#) by feminist activists who have experiences supporting women accessing clinics. In the 2018 [CEDAW Inquiry](#) into abortion services in Northern Ireland, CEDAW noted that harassment by anti-abortion protesters was in violation of women's right to seek sexual and reproductive health services and that protestors were emboldened by lack of prosecution.

Hopefully, this Bill will progress within this mandate to afford women and pregnant people the protections they deserve. While much progress is needed in relation to the commissioning of services, particularly as areas such as the Western Trust currently have no provision, this is a step in the right direction for women and pregnant people across Northern Ireland.

Rachel Powell Women's Sector Lobbyist WRDA

Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights Update

The Bill of Rights Working Group (a group of members of the Human Rights Consortium) have had several recent meetings with Stormont MLAs across a range of political parties to push for concerted action on the Ad-Hoc Bill of Rights Committee to ensure that recommendations for a strong and meaningful Bill of Rights are brought forward by that Committee.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights was originally due to produce a report on the 21 October, but this date has now not been met and looks set to be further pushed back. We understand that a paper has been circulated to parties represented on the Committee for consideration. The paper amalgamates the range of suggested human rights standards that were proposed for inclusion in a Bill of Rights by the various witnesses who came before the Committee – this includes a range of local civil society organisations.

Political parties have been asked to consider this paper internally and report back in early November on which rights within that document that they would support including or excluding from a Bill of Rights. Once there is agreement within the committee on which rights should be included there will likely be further discussion on mechanisms for enforcement and the precise legislative process to enact a Bill of Rights amongst others. Once that is complete it is likely that a report of these proposals would go to the Assembly for discussion. There is no indication of when a report might be forthcoming from the Ad Hoc Committee but their Terms of Reference requires them to submit a report to the Assembly by 28 February 2022.

Given the current focus by the Committee on agreeing the scope of the rights to be included in a Bill of Rights it creates further urgency around engagement with political parties on that Committee to push for an enhanced set of protections in a Bill of Rights in line with local needs and best international practice.

The Bill of Rights Working Group will continue to meet with MLAs to push for a substantive, meaningful and enforceable Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. For more information on how you can raise your

voice and help convince MLAs of the urgency of having a serious approach to advancing our local human rights protections then, please go to the Human Right's Consortium [Make Our Future Fair campaign](#) page.

We are calling on all of our members, broader civil society and the public to help put pressure on our elected officials to ensure that this Ad Hoc Committee helps deliver an effective Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, that upholds and advances human rights for everyone.

Human Rights Consortium

UK Community Renewal Fund

The UK Government has just announced the successful bidders for the UK Community Renewal Fund. The list of successful bidders across the UK can be accessed [here](#). Bids worth £12.3M have been awarded to projects in Northern Ireland.

The CRF was announced as a one-year scheme to pave the way for the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the UK Government's replacement for EU Structural Funds (for background on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund click [here](#)).



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