



Rural
Community
Network

Annual Report 2020 - 2021

Rural Community Network (NI)



Chair's Report – John Waddell

I am pleased to introduce Rural Community Network's annual report which gives an outline of the vast range of activities undertaken by the organisation over the past year. It truly would not be possible in this report to fully reflect the enormous effort over the past twelve months of RCN staff who have worked throughout the pandemic delivering a service for our membership and representing rural. I would like at the outset to thank all of the staff for their commitment and support. Covid 19 pushed us into a local lockdown, closed many of our group hubs and sent us all into a daze of homeworking, home-schooling, and learning how to use technology to connect. It also saw the community sector in rural regions respond to the crisis by stepping up to make a difference in their communities and to put vulnerable and marginalised people to the forefront of their activities. Rural community transport changed from a service that largely delivered people to support centres - with food based activities like luncheon and social clubs; to one which reversed the model bringing food and supplies to people.

We saw the value of strong robust community development activity in our rural regions and witnessed partnership, collaboration and a pulling together like never before. Diverse groups, for example, the Orange Order, GAA, Sports Clubs and Churches took up the mantle when local groups couldn't respond due to health vulnerabilities of their leaders. Our 'In this Together' project shone a light on the work being done across rural regions by small voluntary led groups and it showed the impact of a caring hand on those who were isolated and lonely and vulnerable.

Staff in RCN sat at the Emergency Leadership Group, working with local Trusts and Foundations and emergency funding organisations to draw attention to rural regions; and ensured the needs of rural populations were not forgotten when emergency responses and support were being devised centrally. It has been a busy year and the joint working across the sector, with our membership, with government departments and councils has been excellent and fruitful. Our work with a number of NI-wide and UK based funders has yielded financial and strategic support for rural.

Support for our membership is the core of RCN and on their behalf we lobbied and campaigned about digital exclusion issues seeking resources and support and placed a spotlight on how some areas were being left behind. Staff made phone calls, email contact, and Zoom sessions with our

membership base – ensuring we were kept abreast of their experiences and their challenges during the pandemic and connecting them to funding opportunities and sources of support throughout.

Looking to the future, work continues within the Network on large scale policy issues; a new rural development framework for the region; the introduction of a climate change bill (while there are two on the table for discussion); the move towards creating greater sustainability of our environment and the development of legislation to reduce harmful human activity on our planet.

We welcome the move to develop social inclusion strategies which will speak to the heart of the work of this network and will provide space for us and our membership to consider how they can be tailored to suit rural regions. Recent announcements about the provision of new social housing in NI are to be welcomed and RCN will continue to lobby for a fair share of rural new builds to be located in rural regions. More than ever we have seen the value in the strong regional representation of rural that RCN provides.

Finally, can I thank the Board for their continued wise guidance and support over the past year and the way that they have all adapted to the changed environment. I hope that at some point over the next 12 months we may all be able to meet up again face-to-face and until then I hope you and all your families and friends stay safe.

John Waddell



Background

Rural Community Network is a voluntary membership-based organisation supporting rural communities across the region. RCN works with rural communities to address issues relating to poverty, inequality, community and good relations.

RCN adopts a community development approach to its work. Areas of work include community development training, action research, policy analysis, peace-building, strategic planning, consultation, mediation and facilitation.

OUR VISION - is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities whose contribution is valued across Northern Ireland.

OUR MISSION - is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged and excluded.

OUR VALUES - are set within the context of community development which is a long-term value based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion. The values we bring to our work are:

- Community Empowerment
- Social Justice
- Collective Action
- Working/Learning Together
- Equality and Anti-discrimination

Trustees' Report

RCN continues to be in a consortium with NICVA, CENI and CO3 in the extension period of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP) funded through DAERA and DfC to deliver key services to community and voluntary sector groups throughout Northern Ireland with a strong rural presence.

Rural Community Network (NI) currently uses the RISP funding to part support a Director's post, a Policy and Public Affairs post, a Community Learning and Skills post and a Finance and IT post. Rural Community Network (NI) currently has three staff employed through a Community Relations Council Core funded programme. In addition, RCN has secured significant contract and tender work through bids to undertake work in relation to poverty research, facilitation, housing, education and peacebuilding.

The following report gives a snapshot of the achievements of Rural Community Network during the reporting period under our 4 strategic aims to illustrate how we are meeting our targets across the aims and objectives of our strategic plan. Our fifth aim in the Strategic Plan concerns board and staff development and organisational policies and procedures and is not reported on in this document.



Aim 1 - Empowering the Voice of Rural Communities

- **COVID Response** – RCN is part of the Emergency Leadership Group NI and Health Sector Leadership team dealing with issues of food distribution, advice service provision, mental health and wellbeing, volunteering, pharmacy delivery and support and the recovery plan.
- **Charity Sector Support** – RCN made the case that more clarity around support for the Charity Sector in light of Covid was needed so that smaller groups like those in our membership could be considered when the dormant funding becomes available.
- **Ad Hoc group** – RCN is part of the group supporting North South East West relations to talk about the impact of Brexit, Protocol, funding for All Island projects and support for groups and individuals in border regions.
- **9 Consultations / Policy Link** – RCN submitted written responses to Budget Consultation; Climate Change Bill; Bill of Rights (2); Programme for Government; Mental Health Strategy; Older People's Strategy; Further Education Support and Charging Policy CAFRE; Definition of Affordable Housing and an edition of Policy Link.
- **Meetings with MLAs and Departments** – meetings included issues on rural social housing issues, Draft Programme for Government outcomes framework, Rural Needs Impact Assessment issues, Brexit, and draft budget.
- **Rural Residents' Forum** - supporting the Forum through Zoom presentations to raise awareness of Rural New Building targets, Personal Independence Payment and Rural Needs Act.



Aim 2: Promoting, supporting and celebrating community development practice in rural communities

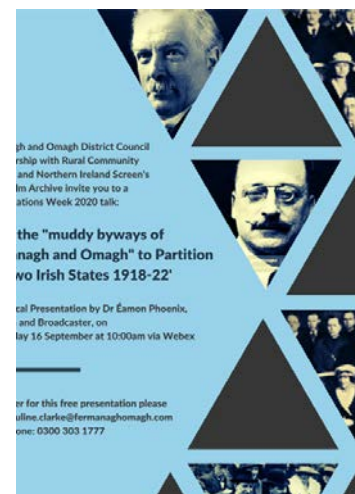
- Series of Zoom webinars for members such as 'Building Back Better? Lessons for the Community and Voluntary Sector from the Pandemic'; 'Assembly Explained'; 'Rural Digital Exclusion Issues'; 'Community Responses to the Pandemic'; 'Health, Social and Economic Impact of Covid 19'.
- RCN is a partner in the UK 5G New Thinking Project which aims to empower rural and poorly connected communities to see how they could build their own wireless networks and address 'not' spots by trying to use 5G technology.
- A wide range of other meetings to promote rural living in Northern Ireland with NIO, Party leaders, broadband companies, media, environmental groups and rural support networks.
- Community Leadership Into the West – funded by National Lottery Community Fund with Fermanagh Trust and Holywell Trust to revive training and support in community development and leadership in the rural West with 26 signed up for the Diploma.





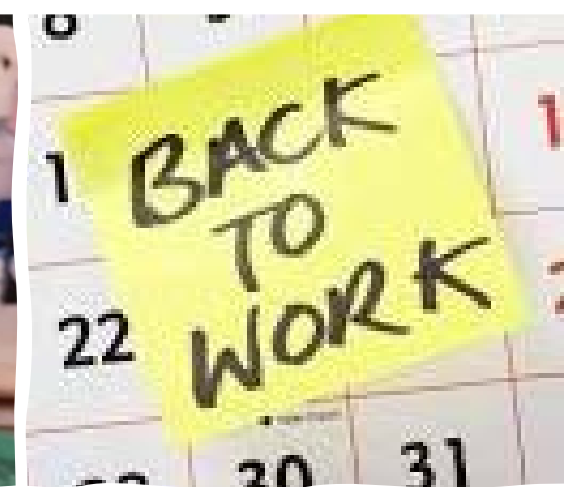
Aim 3: Actively working towards an equitable and peaceful society

- Beyond Belfast practitioners support group – RCN ran 7 support meetings for practitioners who are largely working in isolation in their communities during the COVID pandemic.
- In this Together project – celebrating the good work that communities made in response to Covid. 20 groups made videos, sent pictures and stories of how they reacted locally.
- Organised a series of programmes including Shared History, Ordinary Women in Extraordinary Times, State of Northern Ireland, Decade of Centenary, Brownlow House Talk on Americans and WW2, Get Real project, Williamite Wars and United Irishmen.
- Successful application to National Lottery Heritage Fund Shared History Fund for '100 Years of Change in NI'.
- As part of Good Relations week organised a seminar on 1920 – 1922, launched a peace quilt and held a talk on the Polish community in WW2.



Aim 4: Supporting rural communities to realise their potential and ambitions

- **Covid** – one to one support was given for groups applying for financial support including the Covid Communities fund, Red Cross Hardship fund and Children in Need.
- RCN gave out **grants** of £238,480 to groups who have as one of their core aims the promotion of religion from CFNI, National Emergency Trust, New Needs Funding and Community Arts Culture & Heritage Fund.
- **Supported community and faith sector** through a series of webinars and online training including social media, Twitter, Instagram & Canva; Fundraising, Funding Applications; Lobbying & Campaigning; Succession Planning; Return to Work Premises; Social Enterprise COVID-19 Fund; Facilitating Effective Meetings; and Fundraising for Schools & PTAs.
- **Social Value Engine** – further funds were received to develop the Social Value Engine to help 15 community groups and statutory agencies measure their social return on investment. Demonstrations were given to 59 potential groups.
- **RCN Membership Survey** – members were surveyed on their issues and needs and found that many of our groups are acting and responding to the crisis, but many are worried about their future sustainability. Affordable, reliable digital connectivity for rural regions remains an ongoing issue.



Summary of Financial Activities for the year ended 31 March 2021

The FULL statement of financial activities for 2020-2021 is available to download from

[RCN's FULL Annual Report and Financial Statements 2020-2021](#)

	Unrestricted Funds £	Restricted Funds £	2021 Total £	2020 Total £
Incoming resources from generated funds				
Voluntary income	3,570	152,893	156,463	102,614
Investment income	38	0	38	123
Incoming resources from charitable activities				
Charitable projects income	57,299	353,738	411,037	164,578
Other incoming resources	7,248	0	7,248	9,413
Total incoming resources	68,155	506,631	574,786	276,728
Resources expended				
Charitable activities	28,756	491,267	520,023	297,928
Governance costs	50	2,286	2,336	3,400
Total resources expended	28,806	493,553	522,359	301,328
Net incoming/(outgoing) resources	39,349	13,078	52,427	(24,600)
Total funds brought forward at 1 April 2020	434,813	6,522	441,335	465,935
Transferred to/(from) Capital Fund	2,456	(2,456)	0	0
Total funds carried forward at 31 March 2021	476,618	17,144	493,762	441,335

	2021		2020	
	£	£	£	£
Fixed assets				
Tangible assets		317,819		322,743
Current assets				
Debtors	866		1,102	
Cash at bank and in hand	177,691		120,300	
	<u>178,557</u>		<u>121,402</u>	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	<u>(2,614)</u>		<u>(2,810)</u>	
Net current assets		<u>175,943</u>		<u>118,592</u>
Total assets less current liabilities		<u>493,762</u>		<u>441,335</u>
The funds of the charity				
Restricted income funds		17,144		6,522
Unrestricted income funds				
General funds		78,935		32,206
Designated funds		<u>397,683</u>		<u>402,607</u>
Total unrestricted income funds		<u>476,618</u>		<u>434,813</u>
Total charity funds		<u>493,762</u>		<u>441,335</u>

These financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to companies subject to the small companies regime. The financial statements were approved by the Board of Trustees and authorised for issue on 30th November 2021 and are signed on its behalf by:



John Waddell (Chair)

Company Registration No. NI31418

Funders



Staff

- Director – Kate Clifford
- Policy & Public Affairs Officer – Aidan Campbell
- Community Learning & Skills Officer – Conor McGale
- Finance & IT Officer – Kathryn Kerr
- Snr Community Relations Officer – Charmain Jones
- Community Relations Officer – Craig Barr (not pictured)
- Administrator - Teresa McKernan



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