

JULY 2022



**Rural
Community
Network**

New Assembly elected but not functioning

NI Assembly elections took place on May 5th with number of MLAs returned for the respective political parties as follows:

Sinn Féin	27
DUP	25
Alliance Party	17
UUP	9
SDLP	8
People Before Profit	1
TUV	1
Independents	2

Following the election, the Assembly met on May 13th and were unable to agree to elect a Speaker, nor to nominate Executive Ministers, click this [link](#) to read the Official Report of the debate. As a result, the Assembly is unable to meet and unable to take decisions. The DUP has refused to allow nominations to proceed as they seek to pressure the Tory government at Westminster to make changes to the NI Protocol which has introduced checks on goods moving from Britain into Northern Ireland. The UK Government has responded by introducing the NI Protocol Bill which, if it becomes law in the coming months, will give UK government Ministers the power to disapply much of the Protocol. Whilst the EU has expressed its condemnation of this move it remains to be seen if the Protocol Bill can move through all stages of the legislative process to become law and how the EU will react to that development.

In the meantime, fuel, food and electricity prices continue to spiral and poverty rates are increasing. Health services continue to remain under severe pressure as Covid 19 rates have risen rapidly in recent weeks. Rents and house prices are rising due to shortage of homes across all tenures and there are myriad problems and issues for the Assembly to address. The DUP position is that they

will continue to refuse to nominate to the Executive until the issues they have with the NI Protocol are resolved to their satisfaction. Click on this [link](#) to read party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson's speech at the second reading of the NI Protocol Bill in the House of Commons on 27 June 2022.

Ministers from the previous mandate who were re-elected to the Assembly have remained in post as caretaker Ministers but there are restrictions on the work they can do with no Assembly or Executive in place. If no agreement has been reached to reform an Executive after 24 weeks have elapsed (i.e., by 24th October) then the NI Secretary of State is obliged to call a further Assembly election.

Review of Urgent & Emergency Care Services in NI consultation

RCN responded to the Department of Health consultation on the Review of Urgent & Emergency Care Services at the start of July. You can access our response [here](#). Access to health services is a key concern in rural communities. The move towards centralisation of health services makes sense from a staffing and patient safety perspective but must be balanced with the reality that this involves longer travel times to access emergency healthcare from remote rural communities.

In our response we raised issues in relation to:

- The need for careful planning of the location of Urgent Care Centres and rapid access assessment and treatment services to ensure ease of access to rural patients within an accessible/reasonable travelling distance.
- The need to ensure the phone first model is properly resourced to allow patients easy access to health services as many of our groups are reporting difficulties in even securing telephone consultations with GP surgeries such is the current level of demand.
- A properly resourced and co-designed workforce plan to ensure that the staff needed to operate the Urgent Care Centres are in place, are well supported to develop their new roles and have improved pay and conditions that reflects the level of responsibility they will have as new models of urgent and emergency care evolve.
- The vital importance of investment in the NI Ambulance Service to ensure access to emergency care for citizens across rural NI considering the alarming decline in ambulance response times in recent years.

Key to any reshaping of urgent and emergency health care will be the re-establishment of a functioning Assembly and the allocation of additional funding.

Cost of living payments announced by Communities Minister

Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey confirmed in June that cost-of-living payments will be made to households in greatest need over the coming months. Payments of up to £650 will be made in two stages in July and Autumn 2022 of £326 and £324 to people in receipt of a range of income related and disability benefits and pensioners. Households in receipt of the following income related benefits will be eligible:

- Universal Credit
- State Pension Credit
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Income Support

Households in receipt of either Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit may also be entitled to the cost-of-living payments.

Households in receipt of the following disability benefits will also be eligible for a £150 lump sum payment:

- Attendance Allowance
- Constant Attendance Allowance
- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- War Pension Mobility Supplement

Click on this [link](#) for further detail.

People on low incomes struggling to make ends meet but not in receipt of benefits or state pension will not be able to access these cost-of-living payments. The UK government has announced £400 energy price discounts for all households to offset the massive rise in energy costs, but these are in doubt in Northern Ireland due to the absence of a functioning Executive. If this funding is allocated using the Barnett consequential mechanism, then it would be added to the notional budget of a NI Assembly Department. It would then need NI Executive agreement to be spent. Whether the Executive can be re-established, or a work around can be found, this discount would go some way to helping households in rural communities offset the huge rise in energy costs before the winter.

Reform of Adult Social Care NI consultation

RCN responded to the Department of Health consultation on the Reform of Adult Social Care NI. You can access our response [here](#). The average age of people in rural areas is higher and where younger people have migrated to towns and cities for work there can be a bigger burden of care in rural areas. The contribution of family carers has been shamefully neglected for decades and the provision of domiciliary care services in rural communities must address the challenge of additional travel time to people who live in dispersed settlement patterns.

In our response RCN raised the following issues:

- We supported proposed action to improve the pay, terms and conditions of the lowest paid in the social care workforce. The additional costs to provide care work in rural communities where significant travel is required needs to be recognised and care workers in rural communities reimbursed for travel costs which have grown exponentially in the past six months.
- Further action and investment may be needed to support workforce development for the care workforce as more complex care needs emerge in the coming decades with additional care needs for people with dementia.
- We suggested that information about the population age profile (and other relevant metrics) be accessed at a locality level, so that any spatial patterns which might impact on demand can be identified and social care can be planned accordingly.
- We suggested that an effective lone worker policy is in place for those social care staff whose jobs involve them making home visits in or regularly travelling through rural areas, where mobile phone signal connectivity may be unreliable.
- We questioned how the potential of assistive and adaptive technology to transform social care services and the lives of service users' needs to consider additional barriers to digital inclusion in rural communities where people may have difficulty accessing broadband or have other barriers to online engagement.
- We agreed that services to support people with management of direct payments need to be made available regionally and suggested that the Department monitor levels of uptake of direct payments. If a lower uptake is identified across rural areas, we recommended that further work with carers and carer organisations is undertaken to understand why uptake is lower.

We agreed with the view expressed that there is a need to support family carers as their contribution to providing social care to their family members and the wider contribution this makes to society has been completely taken for granted for decades. However, we are concerned that there doesn't appear to be any actions in the strategy to support family carers.

Stroke Care Action Plan Announced by Health Minister

In June Health Minister Robin Swann published an action plan for stroke services which can be accessed at this link. This follows the Reshaping Stroke Care consultation the Department of Health undertook in 2019 which received a lot of public interest and attracted over 19,500 responses. RCN's response to the Reshaping Stroke Care consultation can be accessed [here](#). Plans for reshaping stroke care were deferred as the Health Service responded to the pandemic.

The consultation proposed several significant changes to how stroke care and post stroke rehabilitation services would be delivered across Northern Ireland. The consultation stated that the intention was to develop a network of Hyper Acute Stroke Units (HASUs) which would operate on a 24/7 basis. To develop this level of service across a network of hospitals the consultation stated that stroke care services would be removed from several other hospitals to concentrate specialised staff resources to enable 24/7 staffing and ensure the throughput of patients required. Several models were proposed for the location of HASU network to gather public feedback on. The proposal to remove stroke care services from smaller hospitals caused considerable concern at the time and undoubtedly contributed to the large public interest in, and response to, the consultation. RCN raised our concerns that the HASU network would lead to increased travel time for patients from rural communities and thereby increase the risk of worse outcomes for stroke patients. We also questioned whether additional resources would be invested in NI Ambulance Service to facilitate transfer of stroke patients to HASUs.

The just published Stroke Action Plan does not include any decisions yet on the location of HASUs with the Minister's statement saying that further analysis is to be undertaken and a preferred option to be identified by Summer 2023. The statement goes on to say that an external review of the legitimate concerns raised during the consultation and an update of the evidence base underpinning the Action Plan will be commissioned as new health needs may have emerged due to the pandemic. You can read the Stroke Action Plan at this [link](#).

Impact of Brexit on S75 groups in NI – EU Funding research

The Dedicated Mechanism was established by the NI Protocol to monitor the UK government's commitment that Equality and Human Rights safeguards would be protected in Northern Ireland after Brexit. The UK government also gave a commitment that in NI they would keep pace with EU equality and human rights standards in certain areas to ensure NI doesn't fall behind EU minimum standards in equality and human rights in relation to Gender, Racial or Ethnic Origin, Religion or Belief, Disability, Age and Sexual Orientation. This was agreed as part of the Protocol between the UK and EU as both parties recognised the importance of human rights and equality protections in the Good Friday Agreement. The Dedicated Mechanism is comprised of the NI Equality Commission and the NI Human Rights Commission, and they work with the Irish Human Rights & Equality Commission to oversee rights that have an island of Ireland dimension. For more on the origin, function and role of the Dedicated Mechanism click [here](#).

The Dedicated Mechanism Unit (DMU) recently published research on *EU Funding: Impact of Brexit on Section 75 Equality Groups in Northern Ireland* which can be downloaded [here](#). The research considered the potential impact of the loss of EU funding on Section 75 groups in Northern Ireland and set out recommendations for future funding, including the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The DMU then published key policy recommendations relating to the proposals outlined by the UK Government on replacement EU funding, including the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) which can be downloaded [here](#). Recommendations include:

- Governance for the UKSPF should be delivered through existing NI Department structures
- The Secretary of State for NI should designate the UK Government Department(s) responsible for delivery of UKSPF for the purposes of Section 75
- The UK Government Department(s), if so designated, should show leadership and commitment in carrying out their Section 75 duties.

The report also includes a series of recommendations for implementation of the UKSPF which addresses issues of childcare support for participants in programmes, the need to avoid funding gaps between the end of current EU programmes and replacement programmes and the need for replacement programmes to simplify application processes to ensure smaller organisations are supported to apply.

CCBS Review on Remote working policy and practice to be published shortly

RCN recently commissioned The Centre for Cross Border Studies to produce a comparative review of policy and practical support offered in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to support remote working. This review was undertaken as part of our work as partners in the 5G New Thinking project. This UK wide project looked at how 5G technology could be implemented to address connectivity challenges in rural communities. More information on the 5G New Thinking project can be found [here](#).

The review, which will be published shortly, examines the range of policies developed to support remote working in the Republic of Ireland. It also looks at the practical support for remote working which developed at pace over the past two years, partly in response to the widespread adoption of home working during the pandemic and the various lockdowns introduced as a result. It then compares the policy and practical support for remote working in Northern Ireland.

Connectivity, in its broad sense,

is one of the five thematic pillars of Northern Ireland's Rural Policy Framework. Two of its four associated priority interventions also make the link between how the connectivity of rural areas and improved access to digital communication are fundamental to assisting in more balanced regional development. At a recent seminar hosted jointly by CCBS and RCN with rural stakeholders, the following factors were identified as being critical to support the development of remote working in rural communities in the Republic of Ireland to date:

- Policy across Government Departments was aligned
- A clear implementation strategy was developed
- Appropriate levels of investment provided
- Support for the hub ecosystem
- Childcare provision
- Support for people with disabilities
- Investment in digital skills

The Review will be published shortly on RCN's website.

Research makes recommendations for Delivery of the Rural Policy Framework

RCN and NIRWN recently launched research which reviewed the operation of previous Rural Development Programmes in Northern Ireland and made recommendations for the delivery of the new Rural Policy Framework which will replace it. The “Looking Back to Go Forward” research was carried out by Professor Ruth McAreavey from Newcastle University and funded by the Community Foundation NI.

Key findings from the research were:

- An increasingly “high bar” had been set for groups to reach to access rural development funding as versions of the Rural Development Programme became more difficult to apply for, with more onerous requirements for procurement and difficulty raising match funding.
- Women, people with disabilities, children and young people and minoritized communities benefitted much less from previous programmes and were less involved in its governance.
- That a renewed effort was required to build partnership, recognise the contribution that all social partners could make to rural development and ensure the next rural policy framework was less “Council centric” whilst retaining leadership to address strategic issues such as climate change.

The report then made a series of recommendations for the delivery of the Rural Policy Framework which included ensuring multiple entry points into the programme to allow smaller organisations to access it, deepening grass roots engagement and taking practical steps from the start to animate the involvement of Section 75 groups in the programme and providing delegated funds to address new needs as they emerged from the community that were outside the original programme parameters.

The Full report is available [here](#)

The Executive Summary of the report is available [here](#).

UK Bill of Rights Briefing

On Monday 22nd June the UK Government submitted the 'Bill of Rights Bill' to the House of Commons. If passed, this Bill will eradicate the existing Human Rights Act 1998 and undermine the protection of rights across the UK. This 'Rights Removal Bill', as it has been dubbed, would enable a substantive weakening of protections under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) by, for instance, reducing the powers of domestic courts to read existing UK legislation compatibly with Convention rights. In practice, while Courts are currently able to respond to human rights violations by ensuring that the relevant legislation is applied in a rights-compliant manner, they will now only be able to identify where legislation violates the ECHR (by making a 'declaration of incompatibility'), which the Government may choose to ignore. As such, this removes a vital remedy for rights violations. The Bill will also limit people's ability to bring human rights claims to domestic courts, introducing a restrictive 'permission' stage where a claimant would now be required to evidence that they had suffered a 'significant disadvantage'.

The Bill includes specific clauses allowing, and even encouraging, divergence from the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) thus, setting the UK on a collision course with the Strasbourg court as we will still be bound, as signatories of the ECHR, to comply with its judgments. It also removes requirements for the Government to comply with interim measures issued by that Court, such as those delaying the Home Office's attempted deportation flight to Rwanda. The Bill will additionally require courts to take a highly restrictive approach to interpreting Article 8 (the right to private & family life) in cases related to deportation, while further excluding human rights claims relating to overseas military operations. Overall, this Bill seeks to interfere with judicial determinations on human rights matters in the UK, whilst simultaneously diminishing the levels of protection available to individuals.

From a local perspective, several provisions of the Bill contravene the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which required the incorporation of the ECHR and meaningful access to the courts and remedies for breaches of Convention rights. Domestic courts would be prevented from continuing to place 'positive obligations' on public bodies (i.e., requiring positive action from those bodies) to comply with Convention rights. This, in turn, prevents access to remedies for a breach of rights. These same positive obligations have been vital advocacy tools to hold public authorities to account for their treatment of people in care, in education, in housing and many other circumstances. It has also been an invaluable instrument to allow civil servants and decision makers to take proactive and positive measures to protect rights before they are violated and not after.

It is expected that the Government will attempt to progress this legislation quickly, possibly before summer recess to get it on the statute books this autumn. The [Scottish and Welsh Governments](#) have both condemned the Bill, encouraged the retention of the Human Rights Act and highlighted the failure to take account of devolved views and concerns with their proposals. The Human Rights Consortium, our members and the vast majority of people across Northern Ireland support the Human Rights Act and do not wish to see it removed or its powers diminished. We have campaigned long and hard for a positive, forward-facing Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and will not accept this cheap knock off version that removes and undermines our rights. We will be publishing further analysis of the Bill and options for how to respond in the coming weeks. Please follow the Consortium on [Twitter](#) to keep up to date with further developments.

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