

November 2022



Rural
Community
Network

Caretaker Ministers Step Down as Stalemate Continues

In what feels like a bad sequel to a movie that was not particularly good the first-time round, the NI Executive Ministers left their “caretaker roles” at the end of October. This means that the limited discretion they had to deliver against their Ministerial responsibilities will transfer to civil servants. The turmoil inside the Tory party following the collapse of the Liz Truss government meant little to no focus had been given to either talks with the parties in Northern Ireland or discussions with the EU on the Protocol — despite some positive noises from various UK and Irish government ministers at the start of September.

The DUP have clearly signalled that they will not be re-entering the Assembly until they are satisfied with progress on the Protocol; having identified a range of issues including trade between Britain and Northern Ireland which is impacting on some businesses. They object also to the European Court of Justice having a role should disputes arise. Aside from the practical difficulties they have identified (which in many cases are disputed), they also see the Protocol as a threat to the Union and a move towards an All-Island economy.

Meanwhile data shows that many businesses are benefitting from the Protocol. The farming and agri-food sectors are clear that they need free access to both the British and EU markets and have invested a lot of money in adjusting to the current Protocol arrangements. Further positive noises have emerged from meetings in the past weeks between UK and Irish ministers, as the Sunak government signals it wants to work towards a resolution. Whether one can be found that the UK government, EU and parties in Northern Ireland can live with is another matter.

Secretary of State for NI, Chris Heaton-Harris has been forced into an inglorious climbdown after promising to call an election (which none of the political parties wanted) at one minute past midnight on 28th October. Last week he announced a further six-week extension to the deadline to reform the Executive, which could be extended for a further six weeks if required. He promised that an

election would happen in the first three months of 2023 if the Executive was not in place, but we have heard that before.

Trussell Trust Reports Foodbank Demand Soaring

Last week Trussell Trust released its mid-year data (1st April to 30th September 2022) on Foodbank usage across its network. The figures showed a huge increase in demand for their service. A separate report on foodbanks that are part of the Trussell Trust Network in Northern Ireland showed:

- 31,700 emergency food parcels were distributed in that period, including 13,400 parcels for children. This represents a 25% increase in the total number of parcels distributed across Northern Ireland compared to the same period in 2021/22 and a 194% increase since 2017/18.
- Food banks are low on stock, with a lot less food in storage than this time last year and will need to purchase more food to try and keep pace with demand.
- 3,800 families (almost 10,000 people) have been forced to turn to food banks in the Trussell Trust network for the first time. This represents a 25% increase compared to the same period in 2021.
- The majority (91%) of food parcels were distributed in urban areas in the first half of this year.
- However, need for food banks is growing in rural as well as urban communities. Food banks in non-urban communities in Northern Ireland have seen a 74% increase in the number of parcels distributed, compared to the same period last year. Food banks in non-urban communities in Northern Ireland have distributed twice as many parcels in this mid-year period than they did pre-pandemic in 2019/20.
- This is only part of an increasingly grim picture as there are many independent food banks across Northern Ireland that are not part of Trussell Trust's network and many people who need emergency food will not seek support from foodbanks. The briefing goes on to say that the levels of destitution in communities are rising as a direct result of the failing social security system and that this is exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. It calls on the NI Executive and Assembly to be restored urgently and calls for a restored Executive to implement the following measures:
 1. Reinstate the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and extend it to legacy benefits.
 2. A one-off payment of £500 to people entitled to disability benefits or carers allowance.

3. Remove the two-child limit for Universal Credit and child tax credit.

The Trussell Trust report for Northern Ireland can be read [here](#).

Cost of Living & Energy Support Schemes Update

The first payment, of £326, of two cost-of-living payments should already have been received by people on the qualifying benefits. A total payment of £600 was announced earlier this year for low-income households in receipt of qualifying benefits; including households in receipt of income-related benefits, disability benefits and pensioners. Details on eligibility and payments are available [here](#).

If you believe you are eligible for a cost-of-living payment but can't see it in your account, you can report a missing payment at this [link](#). The second cost-of-living payment of £324 should be received this month.

Energy Bills support scheme - £400 for households

This scheme for all UK households was announced by then Chancellor Rishi Sunak back in May. Households in Britain are in receipt of this help from 1st October and will receive six £66 rebates on their monthly energy bills until end of March. Payments to households in Northern Ireland have not commenced because no Executive has been in place to sign off their release to households. The NI Secretary of State, in a [media interview](#) on 10 November, blamed the absence of a NI Executive for the delay in the scheme and said that he hoped there was clarity on the payment to Northern Ireland households "very, very soon".

The Energy Price Guarantee

This is a cap on the price per unit of electricity until end of March 2023. Energy suppliers will reduce bills this winter by 20p per kWh for electricity and 4p per kWh for gas. The discount for households in Northern Ireland will be set to account for energy usage from 1st October. To be clear, this is a cap on the price per unit, not a cap on bills; so, *you will still be charged in accordance with the number of units of energy you are using*. For pre-payment meter users, this cap on the price per unit means that energy top-ups will last longer than would have been the case before the scheme was introduced.

Alternative Fuels Payment

Those not on mains gas for heating and using oil to heat their homes will also be eligible for an alternative fuel payment worth £100. This is particularly important in rural communities in Northern Ireland where it's

estimated that over 80% of homes rely on home heating oil. Unfortunately, like the Energy Bills Support Scheme, there is still no definitive timetable setting out when this payment will be made available to households and no details on how the scheme will work. A UK government press release published on 1st November stated:

“Details of when this payment will be made and how the UK government will identify eligible households will be confirmed shortly.”

The press release is available to read [here](#).

STOP PRESS – The Chancellor Jeremy Hunt in his Budget Statement on Thursday 17 November announced he was doubling the Alternative Fuels Payment to £200 and giving it to every household in Northern Ireland. Click [here](#) for BBC NI John Campbell’s take on this. There is still no date set for when households might receive this payment.

Energy Bills relief scheme – for non-domestic premises

The Energy Bills Relief scheme will also provide a discount on energy costs for businesses and public and community and voluntary sector organisations in Northern Ireland. This is similar to the Energy Price Guarantee and will see a discount on gas and electricity bills for businesses and charities. For all non-domestic energy users in Northern Ireland this government supported price has been set at £211 per megawatt hour (MWh) for electricity and £75 per MWh for gas. The discount will be applied automatically by energy suppliers to eligible premises.

Read more detail on the UK government website [here](#).

Crushed by Cost-of-Living Crisis Campaign Asks

RCN took part in the Crushed by the Cost-of-Living Crisis campaign event which took place in Stormont on 21st September. The event, organised in partnership with a wide range of NGOs, was led by Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick from Ulster University, Siobhan Harding from Women’s Resource and Development Agency and Andy McClenaghan from the British Association of Social Workers. The event heard from a wide range of organisations, but the most powerful contributions were from people with lived experience of the shredding of the social security system, the reduction in buying power of wages and the pressure of inflation on essential household spending. The campaign aimed to put pressure on MLAs to restore the Executive and Assembly and, in the absence of an anti-poverty strategy to help the poorest households through the Winter,

to take the following four emergency measures between October 2022 and March 2023:

- Pause social security debt for six months;
- Reinstatement of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and extend it to legacy benefits;
- A one-off payment of £500 to those entitled to disability benefits or carer's allowance; and
- Remove the two-child limit for Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit.

You can watch the Crushed by the Cost-of-Living event at this [YouTube link](#).

UK Shared Prosperity Fund Update

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) continues to trundle along despite the civil war in the Tory party, which resulted in three Prime Ministers since August. Speculation was rife in advance of Jeremy Hunt's budget statement that the UKSPF and the wider Levelling Up agenda will be significantly scaled back as the Government seek to curb public spending and have been signalling a return to the dismal austerity of the Cameron/Osborne era.

At our last meeting with officials from the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities in October (DLUPHC), it was reported that the Northern Ireland Shared Prosperity plan is being developed with "cornerstone investments" identified as being:

- Employability Programmes;
- Business start-up and growth activity due to our lower level of business starts;
- Pride of place interventions for local authority partnership bids (a small-scale capital scheme); and
- Active travel/green space.

The aim is to have fewer interventions with more impact to avoid spreading resource too thinly. Subject to it surviving the Chancellor's budget statement this week, the UKSPF in Northern Ireland will be worth £127M over the next three years. All projects will be asked how they will address rurality in their project bids; e.g., how they will ensure accessibility for rural people to employability programmes and what provision is made for additional delivery costs to dispersed rural communities.

DLUHC has been engaging with officials in the Department of Finance and acknowledged the need to co-ordinate with SEUPB to ensure the UKSPF in NI is not competing for bidders at the same time. DLUHC officials also confirmed (finally) that UKSPF is designated as a successor programme for the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. It is not, however, a successor programme for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; despite the claims of UK government Ministers that UKSPF was to be the source of future rural development funding post-Brexit and the end of the EU Rural Development Fund in the UK. See our piece below on the Rural England Prosperity Fund for further detail on the successor to the EU Rural Development Programme.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) [announced](#) the launch of the Rural England Prosperity Fund at the start of September. This is designed as a rural top-up for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in England. The Fund is designed to provide capital investment in the eligible English local authority areas. The announcement indicates the scheme will support grants towards converting farm buildings into business premises; investing in gigabit broadband infrastructure in community premises; rural tourism; cycle paths and footpaths; and to develop, restore or refurbish local natural, cultural and heritage assets and sites. The Fund has been labelled as contributing to the “Levelling-Up Agenda” and aims to close the gap in productivity between rural and urban areas in England. This Fund is available for England only with no corresponding Fund in the devolved administrations. The announcement states that:

“Funding has already been provided to devolved governments to support rural communities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the agreed replacement to the Common Agricultural Policy. UK Government is incorporating England’s share of funding to support rural economies into the UKSPF to better streamline and simplify the spending landscape.”

This [press release](#) issued by DAERA at the start of September stated that:

“Funding has been reallocated to a number of agricultural, rural, and environmental projects being taken forward by DAERA in 2022.”

Our understanding is that NI has received an allocation of £320M in this budget year as the agreed replacement to the Common Agricultural Policy; funding for which has been guaranteed by the Treasury until the end of this Parliament. The Minister’s press release states that £287M of this allocation has already been paid out as Direct Payments to farmers

but part of the remaining £33M is for support to rural communities. We have yet to receive clarification on the sum allocated for rural development successor schemes in this budget year but will continue to seek clarification from the Department.

The prospectus for the Rural England Prosperity Fund can be read [here](#).

A Roadmap to Decarbonisation

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies, based in Manchester, recently launched a research report setting out the potential for social housing providers in Scotland to retrofit their housing stock to tackle fuel poverty and reduce carbon emissions. [A Roadmap to Decarbonisation; Retrofit of Social Housing Stock in the South of Scotland](#) says that social landlords in the South of Scotland could create 2000 jobs and £112M of Gross Value Added by 2030. The report sets out the challenges of implementing a deep retrofit programme in the social rented sector in the South of Scotland which is a predominately rural area. It also sets out the opportunities for developing jobs in retrofitting and the role that social landlords could play working collectively to secure savings on materials and include social outcomes in their procurement. The report states:

“The delivery of retrofit is made more difficult, yet more pressing by the three interlinked challenges of climate, cost, and comfort.

Warm, affordable, and healthy homes are essential to wellbeing.

The need to upgrade the social housing stock in the region has been made even more pressing by the push for net zero and soaring fuel prices.

Inflation and Brexit have also made the delivery of retrofit more costly and challenging for RSLs.” (Registered Social Landlords)

The report points out that these challenges also present a huge economic opportunity for the region and the community wealth-building agenda in Scotland to ensure that retrofit work is done in a way that benefits the local economy, improves the comfort of peoples’ homes and reduces the cost of heating, thereby tackling fuel poverty and addressing climate change.

Rural communities in Northern Ireland are facing much the same challenges of fuel poverty, the prohibitive costs of retrofitting and the need to decarbonise home heating; there is much to learn from this report for our social housing sector.

Small School Rural Community Study

Research by QUB academics on the benefits of small schools to rural communities has been published and can be accessed [here](#). The study consisted in the first phase of a questionnaire sent to 201 principals of small rural schools identified by the researchers. The second phase of the research involved focus group discussions in five small rural schools with teachers, school governors, children and parents. Some of the challenges identified by staff in small rural primary schools included financial pressures; staff's intense workloads (including teaching principals' dual/multiple role); and falling pupil numbers (with the threat of closure especially significant for smaller schools). The research also identifies common strengths in small rural schools including their strong relationship with the community; the low pupil-to-teacher ratio; and the family-like environment where everybody knows and supports each other.

The research states that:

“Small rural schools are a big part of their rural communities. Some are perceived to be ‘at the heart of the community’.”

This is not news to anyone who lives in a rural area in Northern Ireland and is borne out by the campaigns waged by communities when small schools are threatened with closure. RCN is concerned that the Department of Education's Area Planning process is leading to rationalisation of small schools within their various sectors where falling enrolment is a problem. Little support or encouragement is being offered to communities to address the issue.

Rural Needs Toolkit for Health & Social Care Launched

The *Rural Needs Toolkit* was launched by Health Minister Swann and endorsed by Minister Poots, Minister for Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs at the start of October. It aims to support Health and Social Care organisations that have a statutory duty to consider the needs of people who live in rural areas when planning and changing services.

RCN and our partners, Rose Regeneration, worked in partnership with Health and Social Care Trusts to develop the *Toolkit*. It builds on the *Rural Proofing Toolkit*, published in December 2021 by the National Centre for Rural Health and Care, Rural Services Network and the

Nuffield Trust as a guide to addressing the needs of rural populations when developing strategies, initiatives, and service delivery plans for NHS England. Our [Toolkit](#) includes local case studies and a section with NI evidence. Several of the case studies which highlighted innovative approaches to the delivery of health and social care in rural NI were presented at the launch.

Delivery of health and social care to rural citizens comes with additional challenges and the *Toolkit* identifies a number of key rural needs considerations. Some of these include:

- Patients have longer distances to travel to acute hospital services, so we need to ensure these are accessible to rural patients and their families including those without a car or who are unable to drive;
- More non-acute services could be made accessible locally, closer to where rural residents live;
- Services which deliver care to people in their own homes need to be designed so they work for people in remote rural locations (whilst retaining the care time made available);
- Innovations in provision, such as digital adoption, should be utilised wherever possible to seek rural solutions but should carefully consider digital exclusion in some rural areas and patient groups; and
- Workforce planning needs to be alive to issues arising in rural locations, including at smaller hospitals, such as recruitment or retention issues and access to professional training.

The toolkit has six themes: 1) Acute Hospital Services; 2) Primary and Community Health Services; 3) Mental Health Services; 4) Public Health and Preventative Services; 5) Social Care Services; and 6) Workforce. We hope that the *Toolkit* helps clarify thinking on rural needs and leads to better outcomes for rural citizens through the delivery of health and social care.

NI Peatland Strategy EQIA Response

RCN responded to the consultation on the *Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy Equality Impact Assessment* at the start of November. Our response to the consultation on the *Peatland Strategy* in Autumn 2021 can be read on our website. In our response to the Equality Impact Assessment, we stated that we believed DAERA needed to collect more detailed data to inform their equality impact assessment including

estimates of the numbers of people in various S75 categories (and their location) who:

- Use peat to heat their homes;
- Are employed directly in the peat extraction industry;
- Are employed in the horticulture industry (which may be affected if a ban on peat is implemented which will affect availability of viable growing medium);
- Are employed in mushroom growing/picking/processing (which may be affected if a ban on peat is implemented).

Our view was that the EQIA should be more explicit that there is likely to be adverse impact on Catholics in the Religious Belief category due to the geographical location of peatland habitats (predominately in the North and West of Northern Ireland). It should also state that the strategy is more likely to impact on people with an Irish identity. Our response also pointed out that because migrant workers make up a considerable proportion of the workforce in the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland, there may be impact on equality of opportunity for people in minority ethnic groups who work in larger peat extraction businesses and in the horticulture sector.

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

Identity and language NI Bill passed House of Commons

The *Identity and Language NI Bill* passed its third reading in the House of Commons at the end of October and will become law when it receives Royal Assent. The legislation tabled at Westminster was one of the commitments made by both Governments as part of the *New Decade New Approach* agreement which enabled power sharing at Stormont to be re-established in January 2020.

The Legislation provides for the creation of separate Irish language and Ulster Scots Commissioners and an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. It also affords official recognition to the Irish Language and removes a 400-year-old bar on the use of Irish in the Courts system. £4M is also allocated towards an Irish Language Investment Fund. Irish language rights campaigners warmly welcome the “long overdue” passing of the legislation but emphasised the need for swift implementation of its provisions. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson, speaking in the House of Commons debate on the Bill warned that those of an Ulster Scots and Ulster British identity were concerned that the legislation did not adequately respect or protect their identity.

Full details of the Bill and its passage can be read [here](#).

Charter for Participatory Budgeting Launched

Participatory Budgeting (PB) as an inclusive way of distributing funding — led by local people and meeting genuine need in communities — has been developing in Northern Ireland over the past five years. The Participatory Budgeting Works project has been promoting PB practice and policy here, collaborating with communities and PB practitioners to develop a Charter for quality PB in Northern Ireland. The Charter was launched in September and recognises that whilst each PB process is unique, they all share a set of common values and practice. The Charter has been developed by PB Works to:

- ensure local communities are at the heart of every PB process;
- highlight the features of what ‘good’ PB looks like;
- provide clarity on what to expect of a PB process;
- support the planning and design of quality PB processes; and
- support the reflection on and improvement of PB practice.

The Charter is a useful resource for anyone who is planning, designing, supporting or taking part in a PB process. You can download the Charter [here](#).

To access a wide range of resources and see examples of PB processes in Northern Ireland click [here](#).

Advisory Panel on Community Wealth Building Report

Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey convened a Ministerial Advisory Panel in March this year to advise on approaches to embedding Community Wealth Building principles in all relevant departmental investment, policy and practice. This builds on learning and capacity building already undertaken by Trademark and DTNI on behalf of the Department. The Advisory Panel presented their report to the Minister at the end of October.

The Panel’s report can be read [here](#). The definition of Community Wealth Building is set out in the Executive Summary of the report as:

“CWB supports collective community ownership of, and democratic control over, the local economy. It does this through a range of institutions and policies, including worker cooperatives, community land

trusts, community development financial institutions, ‘anchor institution’ procurement strategies, municipal and local public enterprise, and public and community banking.”

Some of the report’s key recommendations for actions by the Department for Communities to embed a CWB approach across government in NI include:

- Adopt, deliver, and resource a social economy strategy for Northern Ireland;
- Review and realign existing financial levers to support the social economy e.g., use existing funding schemes to support the social economy;
- Explore the potential for cooperatives, employee ownership, and worker buyouts;
- Explore the potential for a public investment bank as an intermediary for social and green lending;
- Embed participatory budgeting practices across local authorities in Northern Ireland;
- The Department for Communities should prepare a new Community Asset Transfer Delivery Framework;
- Develop a dedicated programme on Community-led Housing; and
- Introduce a Social Value Act and/or make direct changes to procurement guidance.

In welcoming the Ministerial Advisory Panel Report Minister Hargey said:

“This report provides a series of recommendations aimed at addressing poverty and the structural inequalities that exist in our communities. These recommendations will need to be considered by a future Executive as a foundational element of a new Programme for Government.”