

February 2023



Rural
Community
Network

Assembly still down as Protocol talks grind on

The Assembly and Executive remain suspended as the DUP continue to boycott the nomination of a Speaker or Ministers as part of their campaign against the Northern Ireland Protocol. Some more positive “noises” had been made in the early weeks of the new year by both the UK government and EU. The UK government agreed to allow EU access to real-time data from their IT systems for [customs purposes](#).

Substantial hurdles remain; particularly over the role of the European Court of Justice in disputes between the EU and UK government over the protocol and on checks on goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland. Pressure to come to an agreement may intensify in the coming weeks as the UK, the EU and the US government have all indicated their desire to see devolution restored in time for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement on 10th April. Whether a deal can be reached that will sufficiently satisfy the concerns of the DUP so that they can re-enter the Assembly and Executive remains to be seen. The Secretary of State’s announcement last week of legislation allowing [the postponement of Assembly elections](#) for up to a year indicates that there may be months of negotiating to come and has cooled speculation that a deal may be imminent.

Meanwhile, the former head of the NI Civil Service, Sir David Sterling, raised the alarm on BBC NI’s *The View* on 19th January that serious budget cuts would be imposed on NI Assembly Departments (click [here](#) to view). This is as a result of unauthorised overspends in this financial year which would require significant cuts in next year’s budget. Mr Sterling said that “decisions were piling up,” that there are “huge budget pressures in the current financial year and we’re probably looking forward to some very difficult decisions having to be taken next year”. He went on to say that he estimated that out of an overall £14 billion budget for 2023/24, the Department of Finance had up to £1 billion of budget pressures to manage; which would equate to a £1 billion of cuts in public

funding. Since the Department of Health and Department of Education account for over 70% of public spending, this could lead to very difficult spending cuts. The situation is even harder to manage with no Executive Ministers in place to take political decisions that require ministerial sign off.

Stormont restoration deadline passes – again

A further “deadline” to restore Stormont passed on 19th January. The Northern Ireland Secretary of State Chris Heaton-Harris was supposed to hold a fresh Assembly election no later than 13th April, which means an election should have been called by early March. However this deadline was pushed back further when he announced legislation last week allowing [the postponement of Assembly elections](#) for up to a year. Meanwhile the UK government and the EU continue to discuss the Protocol and the UK and Irish governments have also been engaging in meetings (see article above).

Whilst negotiations continue we have the longest health service waiting lists in the UK, our education budget is facing serious cuts, many public sector staff are involved in strike action seeking long overdue improvements in pay and conditions and poverty levels are rising as the cost-of-living crisis takes a grim toll. Stormont has only functioned properly in two out of the past six years. Each Assembly collapse and subsequent delay in restoration further weakens public confidence in devolution and, in turn, the democratic process.

Westminster legislation passed to enable NI budget

Legislation to enable Westminster to pass a Northern Ireland budget in the absence of the Assembly passed through all its stages in the House of Commons on 23rd January. The legislation was required to enable the NI Secretary of State to set a budget for NI Executive Departments for the incoming financial year. The Bill was introduced by Northern Ireland Office Minister Steve Baker, who highlighted overspends of over £660m by Stormont departments in this current year. He stated that “difficult decisions” would be required to put Northern Ireland’s finances on a more sustainable pathway. Considerable additional spending has been required due to inflation and rising energy prices; in particular across public services.

Any spending cuts imposed will impact most severely on Health and Education spending which together account for over 70% of public spending in Northern Ireland. This will, in turn, affect those people who rely most heavily on public services: particularly children and young people; deaf and disabled people; and anyone receiving or waiting on health services.

It emerged on 19th January that the board of the Education Authority had written to the Department of Education before Christmas stating that cuts of £120m requested by the Department before the end of this financial year were not achievable. The letter went on to warn that half of all schools in Northern Ireland would be in budget deficit by end of March 2023. The EA Chief Executive went on to say:

"I feel duty bound to highlight the devastating impact these proposals, if implemented, will have, not only on a generation of children and young people".

For further details click [here](#).

South West Acute Emergency Surgery consultation opens after service closes “temporarily”

The Western Health and Social Care Trust has opened a public consultation on the “temporary” removal of Emergency Surgery services at the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. The Trust announced in November that Emergency Surgery was to be suspended at the hospital from 18th December because of the continued failure of the Trust to recruit the required number of consultant surgeons to staff the service. This follows several rounds of recruitment for consultant surgeons that have failed to attract the number of candidates needed. The Trust stated that patients who require emergency surgery will bypass South West Acute and will be treated at Altnagelvin, Craigavon or Sligo University Hospital, depending on the circumstances of each case.

[The Save our Acute Services campaign group](#) has been campaigning to reverse this decision and has organised protests and meetings with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. They are concerned about the distances people in Fermanagh, particularly those from remote rural parts of the county, will travel to access emergency surgery.

The consultation documents (including Equality Impact and Rural Needs Impact Assessments) can be found at this link <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/swah—egsconsultation/>.

The consultation closes on 10th April 2023.

JRF publishes UK poverty report

Campaigning charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published *UK Poverty 2023; The Essential Guide to Understanding Poverty in the UK*. The full report can be downloaded [here](#). Their research found that 13.4 million people were living in poverty in 2020/21; one in five of the UK population. The report also

states that 7.2 million low-income households are going without essentials – including adequate food, heating, toiletries or adequate clothing – and 4.7 million households are behind on their bills.

The report is based on official poverty data from 2020/21, but incorporates a range of data sources from 2021/22. It says that we have now seen a decline in living standards over 15 years, which is hitting low-income households hardest. At the same time, the UK has become much wealthier; but that wealth is highly concentrated and the UK has some of the largest geographical inequalities of any country in the western world. These long-term trends have been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis brought on by the economic shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the effects of Brexit. The report notes the increase in food bank usage, with the Trussell Trust reporting a rise in food parcels given out post pandemic.

It recommends resetting basic social security benefit rates – and, as a crucial step to protect households that rely on social security – ensuring that they cannot be brought below a minimum floor through repayment of advances or other reductions. It also highlights the need for critical reforms in the labour market; housing market; social security system; and in the organisation of family life and care to make them work in the interests of poorer households. The report calls for the development of a positive vision of working to eradicate poverty rather than just trying to get through the current recession.

JRF says that poverty rates in Northern Ireland and Scotland are lower than in England and Wales. We have the lowest poverty rate of any UK region at 17%. This is predominantly explained by the lower cost of housing here. The percentage of people in Northern Ireland living in rented accommodation is the lowest of any UK region. Weekly median housing costs paid by low-income households is lower than anywhere else in the UK.

Cost of living interventions and support update

As detailed in our last *Policy Link*, the Department for Communities and UK government have been delivering a series of cost-of-living interventions and support. These are designed to help eligible households cope with energy price rises and inflation across all parts of household budgets. For details on various cost-of-living payments click on the Advice NI website [here](#). Whilst it is welcome that low-income households are receiving some additional support with the cost-of-living crisis, it is no substitute for a rights-based social security system that allows people to meet their basic household bills and feed their family.

Energy Bills Support – as well as targeted support for low-income households, government is also providing support to all households with their energy bills. In

Northern Ireland this will be a £600 payment provided through your energy supplier. If you are a Direct Debit customer you do not have to do anything as your energy supplier will credit your bank account with the £600 payment. If you pay on demand when a bill is received or use a pre-payment meter then your energy supplier will send you a voucher that has to be redeemed at a Post Office.

Comprehensive information on the Energy Bills Support scheme can be accessed at the Advice NI website [here](#). Direct debit customers have already started to receive their payments and many pay-on-demand and/or pre-payment meter customers have also begun to receive their vouchers. Payments commenced on 16th January and should be completed by the end of February. Electricity suppliers and the Utility Regulator are asking customers to avoid contacting suppliers to chase a payment before 1st March 2023. However, if you receive a voucher with incorrect information you should contact the supplier immediately as they will be able to issue a replacement.

Levelling Up & Shared Prosperity Fund update

In the second round of allocations from the Levelling Up Fund in January, the UK government announced a £71m investment in ten projects in Northern Ireland. This follows on from the announcement of £49m allocated to projects in the first round, which can be accessed [here](#).

The full list of Northern Ireland projects is:

- £5.1million to modernise 20 rugby clubs to include new female changing rooms;
- £2.3million to fund the purchase of electric buses and deliver new sustainable fuel sources at Belfast International Airport;
- £9.8 million transformation in Bangor to create new waterfront gardens with spaces for events and activities;
- £20million allocated as part of a new development called 'Lakeland' in Enniskillen, which will provide a wide range of indoor and outdoor leisure and recreation facilities;
- £6million to Carnfunnock Country Park in Larne with an upgraded visitor centre and sporting facilities;
- £2.8million to develop a new leisure and recreation centre at Camlough Lake in County Armagh along with improved parking facilities and picnic areas;
- £8.1million to support the development of a new leisure centre in Ballycastle;
- £9million grant to create new green space and recreational facilities in Maghera, which will transform the former Maghera High School into a new

industrial park; £4million to fund urgent works at Belfast's Strand Picturehouse;

- £3.5 million to support the expansion and upgrade of the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Studio in Banbridge.

Whilst these are welcome investments in the communities concerned and several are in rural communities or regional towns that serve rural hinterlands, serious concerns remain about infrastructure investment in Northern Ireland. Roads, public transport, the health service estate, and dozens of schools need serious levels of investment. As we have highlighted in *Policy Link* several times, years of under-investment in water and sewage infrastructure is stopping much needed housing development in many small towns and villages across Northern Ireland. Many English councils have been forced to pause Levelling Up projects or find additional funding from their own budgets as a result of soaring costs of capital investment. This [article](#) tells us that more than £500 million has been lost from various Levelling Up schemes due to inflation and rising costs.

DAERA consultation on the Ammonia Strategy

DAERA is currently consulting on its *Ammonia Strategy*. Ammonia is a by-product of agriculture and 97% of ammonia in the environment in Northern Ireland is generated by farming. Ammonia is contributing significantly to the deterioration of water quality in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of designated sites are currently experiencing ammonia concentrations and nitrogen deposition above critical levels at which damage to plants may occur. An investigation last year by the *Detail* website revealed that manure from farms in the North was being transported across the border for disposal. Their reporting criticised the lack of monitoring of this transboundary movement and the falsification of letters from Teagasc in the Republic of Ireland to help secure planning permission for intensive poultry and pig units in areas where ammonia levels were already exceeding recommended levels – click [here](#) for the *Detail* article. An Audit Office report into the planning system in Northern Ireland also identified as a flaw in the planning system the lack of guidance in relation to the cumulative effect of ammonia to support planning authorities and the public:

“In particular, there is a lack of certainty around how the system deals with applications for development that will produce ammonia emissions. The lack of clear environmental guidance in this area creates significant uncertainty for planning authorities, applicants and statutory consultees. The system urgently

needs updated policy guidance from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.”¹

The consultation document states that the Department is aiming for a 30% reduction in ammonia levels by 2030, using 2020 as a baseline year. The *Strategy* aims to deliver an ambitious and verifiable ammonia reduction programme and conservation actions to protect and restore nature. Significant investment will be needed in equipment, storage and other mitigation measures if the targets are to be met. The *Strategy* does not address the possibility that livestock densities may need to be reduced to protect sensitive sites and to meet ammonia reduction targets.

The consultation closes on 3rd March 2023 and the consultation documents are available [here](#).

NHSCT Maternity Services consultation

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust is currently undertaking a consultation on a review of maternity services. The Trust is suggesting two options for the future of maternity care:

- Consultant-led births would move from Causeway hospital to Antrim Area Hospital; which would mean an additional 600 to 700 births per annum in Antrim. A free-standing midwifery led unit (FMU) would be developed in Causeway for 200 to 300 women suitable for low intervention midwifery-led care and birth. Early pregnancy assessment units, antenatal and postnatal clinics would be retained on the Causeway site. (The deliverability of this option is subject to the outcome of the Coroner’s recommendation for a comprehensive review by the Department of Health of staff numbers, training and policies within FMUs.)
- All births move to Antrim which would mean an additional 900 births per annum at the hospital. Early pregnancy assessment units, antenatal and postnatal clinics to be retained on the Causeway site.

For both options, antenatal and postnatal care will continue in Causeway Hospital.

The proposals will impact on women from rural areas who will have longer distances to travel to give birth if services are moved from Causeway to Antrim.

¹*Planning in Northern Ireland; Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Local Government Auditor, 1 February 2022, p.13. <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/media-files/NIAO%20Report%20-%20Planning%20in%20NI.pdf>*

NHSCT state that this change is required due to recruitment challenges, training requirements and the need for different working patterns.

The consultation documents, including a *Rural Needs Impact Assessment* can be accessed [here](#).

DAERA Rural Policy Framework – RAG nomination process

DAERA recently sought nominations from rural stakeholder organisations to its Rural Advisory Group. The Rural Advisory Group (RAG) is being established by DAERA to provide guidance, advice, and strategic support to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of the Rural Business and Community Investment Programme. The RAG will be made up of representatives from NI Executive departments, local government and key rural stakeholders, who will work together to propose solutions to the priority interventions identified in the *Rural Policy Framework*. The RAG will oversee the implementation of the Rural Business and Community Investment Programme and will help hold government departments, including DAERA, to account for addressing issues in rural communities.

Nominations closed on 31st January. DAERA will now consider nominations received and announce the final makeup of the RAG in due course. RCN and NIRWN have been supporting the Department to ensure a diverse range of nominations are received so that the RAG is representative of rural communities across Northern Ireland. This was one of the key recommendations from our *Looking Back to Go Forward* research undertaken by Professor Ruth McAreavey last year which be accessed [here](#).

Irish Government planning to extend EV charging network

Last month, Irish Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan TD, announced plans for a €100 million government investment in the electric vehicle charging network in the Republic of Ireland. This aims to develop high-powered chargers along every 60 km of the motorway network, facilitate expansion of home-charging and develop destination-charging infrastructure. This investment should encourage more people to consider switching to electric vehicles as the charging infrastructure becomes more widespread and will contribute towards meeting carbon reduction targets.

The Minister also announced the new Shared Island Sports Club Scheme, which opened on 30th January, as the first practical step in the roll-out of the strategy.

This €15 million scheme from the Shared Island Fund will help sports clubs install electric vehicle charge points in local communities across the island of Ireland.

For further information on the Shared Island Sports Club Scheme, click [here](#). Note that expressions of interest for this scheme can only come from Sports Governing Bodies registered in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland. The deadline for expressions of interest from Sports Governing Bodies is 5pm, 28th February 2023 and any clubs included in expressions of interest must meet the conditions set out for the scheme.

Department for Infrastructure publishes EV Infrastructure Action Plan

The Department for Infrastructure published its *Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Action Plan* in November 2022. You can read the plan [here](#). It was developed by the EV Infrastructure Task Force to consider the requirements of a modern EV charging network. The *Action Plan* identifies fundamental issues which need to be addressed now for people who want to switch from fossil fuel to electric vehicles. The *Action Plan* recommends that no resident is more than 25 miles from a rapid charger and that the development of charging infrastructure along our key transport corridors should focus on meeting this requirement.

The Task Force recommends that the NI Executive should, as a priority, make available the funding necessary to implement a project that will ensure there is sufficient strength and capacity in the grid at key strategic sites and service areas along our strategic transport corridors. In terms of public investment in charging infrastructure, a consortium of all eleven district councils was awarded funding from the UK Government Office of Zero Emission Vehicles via the [ORCS scheme](#). This will provide electric vehicle chargepoints in residential areas where households do not have access to off-street parking. The Electric Vehicle Chargepoint grant is also available in Northern Ireland. It provides funding of up to 75% towards the cost of installing EV smart chargepoints at domestic properties across the UK in rented properties or flats. Click [here](#) for details.

Charity Commission NI Strategic Plan consultation

The Charity Commission is currently consulting on its draft *Strategic Plan 2023-2026* and draft *Engagement Strategy*, both of which are being developed following the Independent Review of Charity Regulation commissioned by Minister Deirdre Hargey in 2021. The draft *Strategic Plan* outlines priorities the Commission aims to address to deliver the statutory framework governing

charity regulation in Northern Ireland over the next three years. The draft *Engagement Strategy* aims to set out how the Commission will become more outward-facing and actively engage with stakeholders to enable the sector to comply with charity regulations. Many RCN member groups will be interested in these proposals and how charity regulations may change as a result. We know from our work with members that many smaller groups view charity registration and the annual reporting process as onerous and overly bureaucratic.

The consultation runs until 6th March. You can respond to both plans or just one of them and the Charity Commission is particularly interested to hear the views of smaller charities from urban and rural areas. To access the consultation documents click [here](#).



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