

## **Rural Needs Impact Assessment on The Executive Office's Spending Plans 2023-24 - Consultation Response from Rural Community Network**

### **1. Background to RCN**

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion, and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful, and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has over 200 member groups across rural Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

### **2. RNIA Feedback**

RCN welcomes the fact that TEO have completed a Rural Needs Impact Assessment for the 2023-24 budget. Included below is feedback on this process and how we believe it could take greater account of rural needs when conducted in the future. RCN would welcome to work with TEO and other Government Departments on the development of Rural Needs Impact Assessments on future budgets and regional programmes and strategies.

The Rural Needs Impact Assessment was published for consultation approx. 6 weeks after TEO's consultation on the budget EQIA had commenced. Whilst we understand the pressures the Department was under to produce the EQIA and begin consultation on their budget, it would have been helpful to have had access to the RNIA at the same time as the EQIA so assessments of rural need could have influenced the Department's initial spending decisions. (The Department sought feedback on EQIA by 7<sup>th</sup> June to inform spending decisions).

## **Section 2B**

This section focuses on the various TEO programmes and an analysis of funding allocations by the Department in urban and rural areas. This section could have been improved by explaining how TEO's "overall intention to fulfil the outcomes of TEO programmes in rural areas as they would be in urban areas." It should also consider the challenges faced in rural communities and how funding spent by the Department, may need to be done differently to take account of these.

## **Section 2C**

This section of the RNIA could have been improved by including more detailed analysis of feedback from responses to the public consultation on the EQIA for TEOs spending plans. The RNIA identifies transport and access for rural residents as additional impacts on residents of rural communities. However, we recommend that future RNIA's include statements that acknowledge the additional challenges Section 75 groups in rural communities' face. For example, we know that LGBTQIA+ people in rural communities face additional challenges in accessing services and support and may face greater levels of homophobia.

## **Section 2D**

This section to indicate which policy areas the policy/strategy/plan or public service primarily impacts on should also indicate rural crime or community safety. Any deterioration in community relations/good relations because of budget reductions imposed on TEO could potentially impact this rural policy area. Although not part of the Department's remit, this impact could be compounded by reductions in policing presence due to budgetary pressures on the PSNI.

## **Section 3C**

RCN notes that TEO has referenced one statistical source in this section. We believe it would have been beneficial to reference details gleaned from stakeholder engagement and any feedback provided by consultees during the TEO budget EQIA process to date.

It would also have been informative if TEO could outline whether PSNI data on sectarian/racist/hate incidents in rural communities was considered as evidence in this section. Data on Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in NI disaggregates data down to local council level<sup>1</sup>. However, for the purpose of Rural Needs Impact analysis, this is not particularly useful as it does not analyse these incidents and crimes by urban/rural location. We discussed the absence of published data broken down by urban/rural and how this hinders the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process at a meeting with TEO officials on 30 June. The absence of datasets broken down by urban/rural is a wider data development issue across Govt Departments which we believe needs to be addressed to facilitate better rural needs impact assessment by duty holders.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psnipolice.uk/system/files/2023-05/443047986/Hate%20Motivations%20Bulletin%20Period%20ending%2031st%20March%202023.pdf>

## Section 3D

RCN welcomes the acknowledgment by TEO identifying its need to be aware of its commitment to ensure rural proofing is an integral part of policy but also development plans and strategies.

This section could have been improved by including some more detail on the nature of segregation in rural communities, the potential impacts this has on minority communities and the implications for delivering community and good relations work in rural areas.

More detail could also have been included on the experience of racism, homophobia, and misogyny in rural communities by Section 75 groups. People who are in minority groupings can be much more vulnerable and visible in rural settings and this needs to be considered in policy delivery.

Census data on community background, national identity and passports held may also provide valuable insight. Travel costs are higher in rural areas and the single identity nature of many rural communities may make it difficult to organise venues acceptable to all communities for meetings, programme delivery etc.

From the information provided in this section it is difficult to determine the extent to which TEO has sought to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.

## Section 4A

Due to section 3D on needs analysis containing little information on the social and economic needs of people in rural areas it follows that section 4A sets out a limited analysis of the issues TEO has considered in relation to rural needs. RCN would have expected to see an analysis of how the reduction in budgets in TEO may impact on rural citizens.

We do not accept the logic that the need for Good Relations funding in urban areas should be identified as a barrier to delivery in rural areas. Whilst sectarianism and community relations issues may be more overt in cities and larger towns RCN and other rural stakeholders have raised issues in relation to community and good relations in rural communities for decades. Broadband and mobile phone connectivity as a barrier and transport costs for those delivering programmes.

Broadband infrastructure is improving (due to Project Stratum investment) but digital access is still an issue and in many rural communities there are many “not spots “where there is little or no digital connectivity. Access to suitable devices, the affordability of data and a lack of skills and confidence are all barriers for many rural dwellers.

RCN believes that issues TEO should be considering in this section of the RNIA include:

- Distance to services and lack of effective public transport
- Disengagement of minority communities from wider community development work/structures.
- The segregated nature of many rural communities remains.

- The legacy of the conflict in areas where there was a higher intensity of Troubles related incidents.
- Small numbers of BAME people living in isolated rural communities so it is hard for them to network and to offer support due to additional challenge of distance.
- Racism/sectarianism/homophobia/misogyny are all equally as prevalent in rural as in urban communities and in many areas even more so than in urban.
- Hidden segregation – there are less obvious markers of community segregation in many rural areas. There are no peace walls or barriers etc. and in many areas community dividing lines are invisible to outsiders.<sup>2</sup>
- Patterns of land holding in the countryside – land passed down through families and often only sold within communities.
- In some rural areas paramilitarism and coercive control of communities remains a problem and with reduced policing budgets, effective policing in rural communities becomes more challenging.

## Section 5B

RCN welcomes TEOs commitment that rural communities will be encouraged to apply for funding to both TEO and Councils (where need is identified).

Online delivery may work for some programmes but is not a panacea – barriers to online access still exist for many people in rural communities (as discussed earlier in this response). In addition, the challenging nature of community relations/good relations work may not suit online delivery. The nature of sensitive topics being discussed and the need for careful building of relationships and dealing with conflict may be much more effective in face-to-face settings.

RCN welcomes the commitment that TEO will “give proportionate consideration to look at ways to maintain delivery and mitigate costs by programme managers”.

The RNIA states that the District Council Good Relations Fund, the Central Good Relations Fund, the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and the Multi Ethnic Development Fund don't differentiate between urban and rural areas during the application process. RCN would ask how TEO could more proactively consider rural needs to ensure organisations in rural communities can address community and good relations. For example, practitioners have told us that the isolation of minority communities in segregated rural areas makes practical delivery more difficult. It is harder to undertake behind the scenes work which is often a precursor to effective community relations work in a segregated rural area and therefore its more challenging work.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the 2021 Census, Torrent D5 datazone contains a population breakdown of 98% Catholic religion/religion brought up in and 2% Protestant or other Christian religion/religion brought up in. The neighbouring Portadown A2 datazone, with which it shares a boundary, has a breakdown of 7% Catholic religion/religion brought up in and 86% Protestant or other Christian religion/religion brought up in with little formal opportunity for sharing across these communities. See <https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/area-explorer-2021/N09000009/>

Could TEO monitor applications to ensure that its delivery agents are receiving proportionate applications from rural communities? If monitoring showed under-representation from rural communities could TEO take steps with its delivery partners to encourage uptake?

The RNIA states that information has been gathered by stakeholders via EQIA and NISRA mapping & statistics. It would have been helpful for consultees to have seen how the information gathered has influenced the Budget to take account of rural needs to show how the engagement had shaped budget.

Many of TEO's programmes are delivered on their behalf in partnership with Councils and other delivery partners. However, the Rural Needs duty remains with TEO and may not necessarily apply to all delivery partners. RCN believes that TEO should proactively engage with Councils and their other delivery partners to ensure that TEO's duty to consider rural needs in all its programmes is fulfilled.

As discussed at our meeting with TEO officials on 30<sup>th</sup> June we believe there is additional scope for TEO to encourage Departments to collaborate better considering the current budget crisis. It would be beneficial for TEO to work with other Departmental colleagues on future Rural Needs Impact Assessment of Departmental budgets to identify compounding impact of cuts and how these impact on the social and economic needs of citizens in rural areas.

### **Additional Comments**

RCN is concerned about the compounding nature of cuts across government departments on Section 75 groups. So, for example, an older disabled woman living in a rural community will be adversely affected by cuts to budgets in Health and Social Care which will be compounded by cuts to public transport and further compounded by cuts to services provided by community and voluntary sector organisations funded by TEO. We would suggest that TEO officials should have adopted an oversight role of all cuts across Departments in the absence of Ministers and the Executive to try and identify and mitigate these compounded impacts on some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

When public finances are challenged, history shows that xenophobia and hatred for minority communities can spread. Community relations and good relations work will be needed in the coming years more than ever. Northern Ireland has made considerable progress in addressing sectarianism, racism, homophobia, sexism, and misogyny in the past decade. However, we cannot afford complacency as far right groups seek to exploit fear and discontent at community level. The recent protest at the provision of asylum seeker accommodation in Portrush is a reminder of the need to continue to invest in community and good relations work at grass roots level.