

# RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORK(RCN)

## 2021/22 ANNUAL REPORT



RCN has received significant investment to undertake its work as a regional rural advocacy and support agency from the following sources:





# Chairperson's Report

I am pleased to introduce the Rural Community Network (NI) annual report which gives a summary of the huge range of activities undertaken by the organisation over the past year. This report couldn't possibly reflect efforts made by our staff, the board and membership over the past twelve months, it is simply a snapshot of that. I would like at the outset to thank all the staff for their commitment and support and the work they do on behalf of the membership and wider rural society in NI.

Staff in RCN sit on many regional groups drawing attention to rural regions and ensuring the needs of rural populations are not forgotten when services are being planned and resource allocations are being made. It has been a busy year and we have been working across the sector, with our membership, with government departments and councils to make sure rural voices are being heard at their tables. Our work with several NI-wide and UK based funders has yielded financial and strategic support for rural areas. Staff continue to facilitate training, consultation engagements and run events on behalf of our membership. This contact ensures we are aware of current issues, and we are kept abreast of their experiences and their challenges.

Covid 19 lingered long into this year and continues to impact on our communities. Throughout the pandemic and as restrictions eased somewhat, we saw great responses from many of our community groups, but we also worried about the ability of some to navigate the 'new normal'. For many of our groups returning to pre-pandemic meetings and activities has been difficult and some have chosen to not return currently, they maintain contact using technology, but physical meetings are still not taking place.

As I write, we have a legacy of fear and uncertainty in many communities and a reluctance of some to cause harm or damage to members through the spread of the virus, especially those who offer services to vulnerable elderly and health-compromised individuals.

# Chairperson's Report

But this year also saw the community sector in rural regions respond to the both the covid crisis and the cost-of-living crisis, by stepping up to make a difference in their communities and to put vulnerable and marginalised people to the forefront of their activities. We saw the value of strong robust community development activity in our rural regions and witnessed partnership, collaboration and a pulling together to alleviate hardship.

Looking to the future, work continues within RCN on large scale policy issues; the cost of living crisis, poverty and issues of social exclusion, rural housing, digital inclusion, regional resource allocation, the continued roll out and support of rural peace building, the implementation of the new rural development framework for the region, the sustainability of our environment and succession planning for new leadership in the sector.

We welcome the move by DfC 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. RCN will continue to lobby for a fair share of new build social homes to be located in rural regions.

RCN will be undertaking a strategic review in the coming year and while uncertainty continues with no regional assembly, the outworking's of Brexit, escalating cost of living crisis and the ongoing challenges of the pandemic we will continue to strive to be a credible, valuable voice for our membership.

Finally, can I thank the Board for their continued wise guidance and support over the past year.

# Background

RCN was set up in 1991, as a company limited by guarantee constituted under the Companies Act 2006 and is a registered charity, number XR17297. RCN is registered with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland as a Company Limited by Guarantee, number NIC100009. It is governed by a Memorandum and Articles of Association. The principal office of the company is located at 38a Oldtown Street, Cookstown, Co Tyrone, BT80 8EF.

RCN 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.





# Background

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 changes 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, and CO3 in the extension period of the Generic strand 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.

RCN 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. RCN currently has three part-time staff employed through a Community Relations Council Core funded programme.

In addition, RCN has secured funding for the Ours to Share project funded through the National Lottery Heritage Fund this enables us to employ a fulltime development officer to work with and grant aid groups who are embarking on Heritage related projects. We also have significant contract and tender work though bids to undertake work in relation to poverty research, facilitation, housing, digital inclusion, education and peacebuilding.

The following report gives a snapshot of the achievements of RCN 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.

*The Strategic Plan's other aim is concerned with internal systems and resourcing and is not reported on in this document.*



# Trustees Report

Key figures from this year for RCN Activities

Representation on 29 NI wide committees including:

- Developing Governance Working Group
- Draft Framework for Rural Development Post-Brexit
- Human Rights Consortium Brexit Working Group
- Ad Hoc Group for North South East West Co-Operation
- LGBTQ+ Strategy Group Convened by DfC
- Anti-Poverty Strategy Convened by DfC
- Emergency Leadership Group Convened by DfC
- Sir George Quigley Trust
- Business in the Community Digital Inclusion Group
- Common Good (with Irish School of Ecumenics)
- NI Centenary Committee
- 300+ Zoom Sessions Hosted
- 104 Programmes / Training Sessions Organised
- 124 Training sessions for Groups
- 1895 Number of People attending / Reached by our Programmes
- 109 Meetings Facilitated
- 20+ Groups Received Social Value Engine Impact Support
- 62 Groups Attended Impact Support Training Sessions
- 15 Consultation Responses including Ongoing Policy Representation on Rural Issues
- 5000+ Facebook Likes
- 2621 Twitter Followers
- 7 Blogs Written on Issues Impacting Rural Life
- 10 Rural Brief Newsletter Editions
- 2 Policy Link Publications
- New Website Developed and Rebranding Launched
- RCN Joint Webinars with Lottery Covid 19 Fund 43 Groups Attended
- RCN Joint Webinar with NICVA Re: Re-Opening of Premises 52 Groups Attended
- 7 Beyond Belfast Peace and Good relations' Practitioners Support Sessions

## Strategic Aim 1

# Empowering the Voice of Rural Communities

**Health Sector Transformation:** C and V sector group dealing with the issues facing the sector and the health service in relation to health service reform in NI. Understanding the link between community development, prevention and intervention work at community level and the effects of the social determinants of health on the demand for services across the region.

**Charity Sector Support:** Supporting groups with issues that impact on them across the region such as: access to banking facilities, governance, regulation and digital inclusion. Also significant work to allow post-covid operating support with changes to constitutions with groups including Online access for members and meetings, and funding deadline and delivery changes as a result of the pandemic.

**Representation and Voice:** Meetings with the Secretary of State, EU Commission, Irish Government and UK Government and Departments MLAs on issues such as the Protocol, rural social housing, rural development replacement funding and funding strategies, Rural Needs Impact Assessment issues, Brexit, and budget issues.

**Ad Hoc Group:** RCN is part of the group supporting North South and 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. Maintaining and sustaining support for networking connecting on an East West basis too.

**Rural Residents' Forum:** Supporting the Forum to raise its voice on issues which impact rural tenants - through presentations to raise awareness of Rural New Building targets, Personal Independence Payment, Rural Needs Act.





## **Strategic Aim 1**

# Empowering the Voice of Rural Communities

Consultations responded to include:

- Housing Supply Strategy
- Discretionary Support Payments
- PIP Review
- Antipoverty Strategy
- LGBTQ Strategy
- NI Protocol
- DAERA Environment Strategy
- DAERA Agriculture Strategy
- Rural Development Strategy for NI
- NIHE Homelessness Strategy
- UK Levelling up and Shared Prosperity Fund
- SEUPB Consultations
- NIHE Supporting People
- Agricultural Wwages Reform
- Energy Strategy
- 2 x Climate Change Bills



## **Strategic Aim 2**

### **Promoting, supporting and celebrating community development practice in rural communities**

- 23 Individuals have completed the NUI Galway Diploma in Community Development Practice and are due to graduate in November 2022.
- Training in for groups and individuals in Leadership, Media, Understanding the Rural Needs Act, CD practice and Principles, Lobbying, Meeting management and group work skills, managing conflict and mediation.
- Series of Zoom webinars for members on Succession planning, Building Back Better? Lessons for the Community and Voluntary Sector from the Pandemic; Assembly Explained; Rural Sustainability Issues; Rural Digital Exclusion, The Bill of Rights; Community Responses to the Pandemic.
- RCN is a partner in the UK 5G New Thinking Project 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.
- Social Value Engine – RCN continues to support Impact practice within the sector in an accessible and affordable way. We have invested in a toolkit which helps to measure the social return/ impact of the work of our member groups in the communities they serve.



### Strategic 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:** Supporting groups and individuals on the self-care needed post pandemic.
- **Training and Education:** Organised a series of programmes including Shared History, Ordinary Women in Extraordinary Times, State of Northern Ireland, Decade of Centenary, Get Real project, Williamite Wars and United Irishmen.
- **National Lottery Heritage Fund:** Shared History Fund '100 Years of Change in NI' project that yielded 32 seminars and supported 35 groups to take part in events and showcase work.
- **Strategic peacebuilding:** Continue to engage with DfC, PSNI DOJ, TEO and CRC on issues of rural peacebuilding and issues of racism and sectarianism.
- **Contribution to the co-design groups:** Set up for the social strategies by DFC on LGBTQ rights and the Anti-poverty strategy.
- **Provided Input:** To the responses on Disability and children's poverty issues from a rural perspective.
- **Developing women in the community:** Part of the advisory panel on how that investment can be best made in NI.



## **Strategic Aim 4**

### Supporting rural communities to realise their potential and ambitions

- **5G:** We spent time looking at the connectivity of rural digital inclusion and 'not spots' around NI establishing connections with rural counterparts in Scotland and the republic of Ireland England and Wales.
- **Commissioned a Paper:** On policy needed to enable greater use of digital hubs.
- **Covid:** One to one support was given to groups applying for financial support including the Covid Communities fund, Red Cross Hardship fund and Children in Need.
- **Provided Networking Opportunities:** For practitioners and group to support wellbeing and support for their communities in post covid recovery.
- **Supported the Community and Faith sector:** Through a series of webinars and online training including social media, Twitter, Instagram & Canva; Fundraising, Grants and Foundations, 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:** To further develop the Social Value Engine toolkit to help community groups and statutory agencies measure their social return on investment. Demonstrations given to potential groups. Training sessions delivered on Outcomes Measurement and Theory of Change.
- **RCN Membership Survey:** On their issues and needs at this time and found that very 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 is an ongoing issue.
- **Looking Back to Go Forward Report:** We have begun to look at the effectiveness and impact of leader funding in the region as a tool for Rural Development. This report will explore a series of recommendations which should help to inform DAERA and our membership of what needs to be attended to in future workstreams.



# Project Update: Nothing About Us Without Us

The Looking Back to go Forward research was commissioned jointly by RCN and NIRWN to look back at the successes and challenges of previous LEADER programmes and make recommendations for the governance of DAERA's replacement for LEADER, the Rural Policy Framework. This qualitative research identified the failure of previous programmes to engage with Section 75 groups as project beneficiaries, project promoters or in the governance of programmes. The research offered a set of practical recommendations to address these issues in DAERA's new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme including:

- Proactively encourage participation by providing support to enable those with caring responsibilities to participate.
- Redefine value by testing new ways of capturing 'value' and shifting the narrative away from jobs and the economy to recognise wider benefits from community cohesion and wellbeing.
- Tools to explore include Social Value Engine and wellbeing indicator.
- Test new ways of working such as participatory budgeting.

RCN, NIRWN and report author Professor Ruth McAreavey briefed MLAs from the AERA Committee on the emerging findings from the report in March 2022. For a copy of the Executive Summary of the research [click here](#).

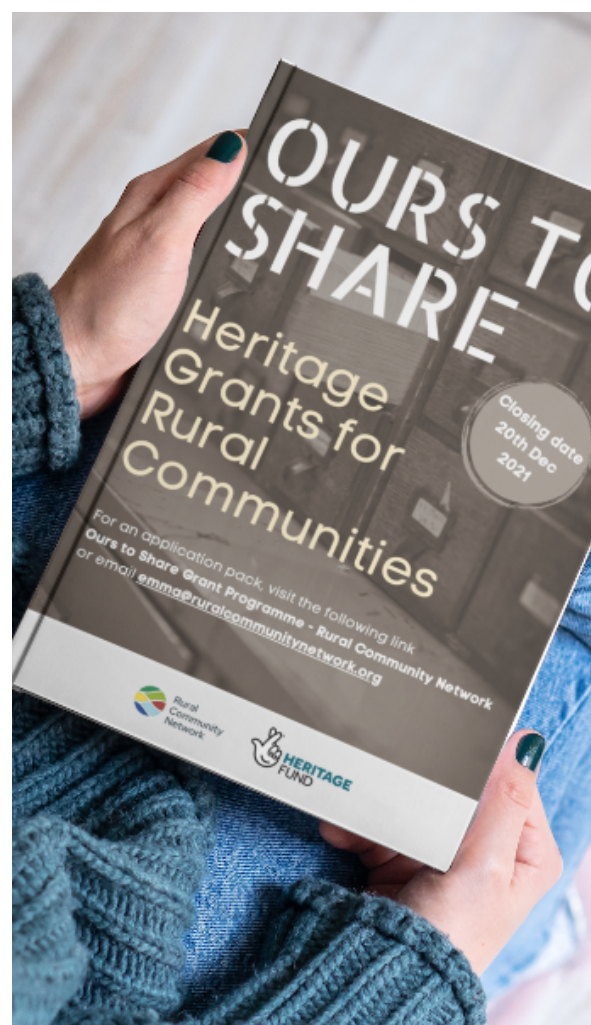


# Project Update: Ours to Share Grant Programme

The 'Ours to Share' project is about exploring all that is important about rural life past, present and future. The project began in May 2021. It provides opportunities and support for rural communities to learn from one another, network and share ideas and challenges faced in exploring rural heritage. The project distributed grants to 20 rural groups to undertake heritage projects that were based on diversity and inviting new faces to the table around heritage.

As well as providing support and guidance for the 20 funded groups, the Project Coordinator has been supporting community groups across Northern Ireland in networking together, providing learning and skills programmes, signposting and sharing information with groups to widen their links with organisations and key contacts within the arts and heritage sectors here. Between March 2021 and March 2022 the following has been delivered:

- 2 grant schemes (£1,000-£5,000 investment) supporting 20 rural heritage projects.
- Set up an advisory panel of 6 members (3 from RCN's board and 3 externals).
- 2 group networking sessions.
- 3 heritage information-sharing sessions.
- 9 learning and skills development sessions.
- 60+ phone calls to groups providing support, for example, skills development, key contacts, signposting to relevant organisations, external funding opportunities and general support.
- 20+ zoom meetings with groups and organisations discussing heritage plans.
- Introducing RCN to a host of new contacts and links within the heritage and arts sector to build upon the previous work that had been delivered around heritage and shared history.



# Project Update: Social Value Engine

2021-22 saw an increase in RCN's work assisting groups measure their impact and Social Value. Throughout the year, we worked directly with 24 groups to help them analyse the impact of their work on their communities/stakeholders. Much of this work was supported by several funders including DAERA & the Department of Communities. Other work was funded by the groups themselves.

Groups we assisted included Food Banks, Social Supermarkets, Disability groups, Community Facilities, Sports Clubs, Social Enterprises, Health & Wellbeing projects, Housing Associations, Social Farms and Volunteer projects.

RCN also organised 15 online training and networking events around Social Value and Impact including analysing COVID-19 responses, collecting data that matters, survey design, Theory of Change, the Social Value Engine <https://socialvalueengine.com/> and sharing best practice in impact measurement.

RCN also carried out a series of awareness raising sessions on Social Value and how groups can measure their impact; 20 groups attended these.





# Statement of Financial Activities

(Including income and expenditure account)

for the year ended 31 March 2022

	Notes	Unrestricted Funds £	Restricted Funds £	2022 Total £	2021 Total £
<b>Incoming resources from generated funds</b>					
Voluntary income	2	5,170	158,064	163,234	156,463
Investment income	3	19	-	19	38
<b>Incoming resources from charitable activities</b>					
Charitable projects income	4	289,257	237,023	526,280	411,037
Other incoming resources	6	8,796	-	8,796	7,248
<b>Total incoming resources</b>		<u>303,242</u>	<u>395,087</u>	<u>698,329</u>	<u>574,786</u>
<b>Resources expended</b>					
Charitable activities	7	143,287	399,649	542,936	520,023
Governance costs	8	182	2,286	2,468	2,336
<b>Total resources expended</b>		<u>143,469</u>	<u>401,935</u>	<u>545,404</u>	<u>522,359</u>
<b>Net incoming/(outgoing) resources</b>		<u>159,773</u>	<u>(6,848)</u>	<u>152,924</u>	<u>52,427</u>
Total funds brought forward at 1 April 2021		476,618	17,144	493,762	441,335
Transferred to/(from) Capital Fund		-	-	-	-
<b>Total funds carried forward at 31 March 2022</b>		<u><u>636,391</u></u>	<u><u>10,296</u></u>	<u><u>646,686</u></u>	<u><u>493,762</u></u>

The statement of financial activities has been prepared on the basis that all operations are continuing operations.

There are no recognised gains and losses other than those passing through the statement of financial activities.



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## 2021/22 ANNUAL REPORT



RCN has received significant investment to undertake its work as a regional rural advocacy and support agency from the following sources:

