

February 2024



Rural  
Community  
Network

## Assembly Returns...Again

After a hiatus of almost two years the Assembly met on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February, elected a speaker and the parties appointed Ministers using the d'Hondt process. This followed a week of rapid political developments as the DUP ratified the *Safeguarding the Union* agreement after months of negotiations with the UK Government. Within days, the Assembly was recalled, and the Executive was formed. The public reaction has been a cautious welcome as there is a myriad of issues to be addressed across the public sector. However, many people will question the stability of the Executive and Assembly, considering the massive challenges to be faced. There is the potential for further turmoil as the UK diverges from EU rules and standards in the coming years; unforeseen consequences on the movement of goods between Britain and Northern Ireland could destabilise politics here.

Looking to bread and butter issues, the Executive "to do" list is a long one and includes issues such as childcare; poverty; huge demand for social housing; public sector pay; and a range of infrastructure deficits. Health is foremost in many people's minds. Health Service waiting lists; access to GP services; implementing pay rises for health workers; and the transformation of health services present a series of interlocking challenges. These issues are of particular concern for people in rural communities– with services either collapsing or being removed from the South West Acute Hospital, Daisy Hill, and Causeway in recent years – leading to public campaigns voicing concerns about the future downgrading of services. RCN accepts that there are clinical reasons why some services need to be relocated, but remoteness of many rural communities and longer travelling times are not given the consideration required. If, in line with the Bengoa Report recommendations, services are to be concentrated on fewer sites, then that needs to happen in tandem with greater investment in ambulance services; in public and community transport; and in the road infrastructure to allow patients to make those journeys. Another key element of the Bengoa recommendations which does not receive as much media attention is the need to invest in primary care at community level. In many rural communities there are serious concerns about GP practices closing

and the strain this will put on neighbouring practices. The new minister Robin Swann, at least, has previous experience in the role and is aware of the issues.

There is a whole host of other issues that the Executive needs to address quickly. It will be crucial for public confidence to see progress on at least some of these issues in the short term.

## New Executive Formed

The recall of the Assembly and running of the d'Hondt system to allocate Ministerial positions based on the last Assembly election results led to the following MLAs being appointed as Executive Ministers, in this order:

First Minister: Michelle O'Neill

Deputy First Minister: Emma Little Pengelly

Justice Minister: Naomi Long

Economy Minister: Conor Murphy

Education Minister: Paul Givan

Finance Minister: Caoimhe Archibald

Communities Minister: Gordon Lyons

Health Minister: Robin Swann

Infrastructure Minister: John O'Dowd

Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Minister: Andrew Muir

Junior Ministers in the Executive Office: Aisling Reilly (SF) and Pam Cameron (DUP)

The SDLP chose to be recognised as the official opposition in the Assembly and will be led by Matthew O'Toole.

## New Executive Announces Funding for Public Sector Pay

The newly formed Executive last week agreed to release funding to Departments, enabling negotiations to begin between trade unions and employers in the health, education, transport, and other sectors. Teaching unions have responded by postponing further strike action while negotiations are ongoing; and no further strike action is scheduled by nursing unions. Finance Minister, Dr Caoimhe Archibald, announced that the Executive had agreed to release £688m for public sector pay as part of the £1.045bn available from the Executive Restoration package for general pressures and pay in 2023-

24. This follows the biggest public sector strikes in Northern Ireland in fifty years on 18th January, when approximately 100,000 public sector workers vented their frustration over pay and conditions: closing schools, halting public transport services, and disrupting health services.

The unions and their various employers will now enter negotiations. ICTU Assistant General Secretary Gerry Murphy said:

*“Whether this funding allocation will be sufficient to settle all industrial disputes will become clear as negotiations between individual unions and relevant departments commence.”*

The Minister also announced £40m of new capital allocations to provide investment in housing, education, and infrastructure projects.

For more detail on allocations by Department click [here](#).

## Scrutiny Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs Appointed

The Chairs and Deputy Chairs of the Assembly Statutory Committees that scrutinise the work of Executive Ministers and their respective Departments were appointed on 6<sup>th</sup> February. Appointments were as follows:

Committee	Chairperson	Deputy Chair
<b>Health</b>	Liz Kimmins	Nuala McAllister
<b>Justice</b>	Joanne Bunting	Deirdre Hargey
<b>Education</b>	Nick Mathison	Pat Sheehan
<b>Communities</b>	Colm Gildernew	Ciara Ferguson
<b>Economy</b>	Phillip Brett	Gary Middleton
<b>Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs</b>	Tom Elliot	Declan McAleer
<b>The Executive Office</b>	Paula Bradshaw	Connie Egan
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Deborah Erskine	John Stewart
<b>Finance</b>	Matthew O'Toole	Diane Forsythe

Information on membership and proceedings of Assembly Committees can be found [here](#).



## Consultation on VCS Infrastructure Support

The Department for Communities consultation on the *Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework* closed recently. The Department was seeking views on how they provide infrastructure support across Northern Ireland to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). They were also asking for views on the operation of the Joint Forum between Government and the VCS and on issues related to charity regulation. The main proposals in relation to infrastructure support were that the Department would continue to maintain regional infrastructure support and that sub-regional support would be provided to generic, sectoral, and volunteering at local Council level. RCN's consultation response emphasised the need to ensure that support for the VCS was available to rural community organisations right across Northern Ireland. We highlighted the fact that most VCS groups in rural communities are managed and staffed by volunteers and that this had implications for the delivery of that support. Our response also raised issues in relation to succession planning, recruitment and retention of volunteers and reducing bureaucracy on small volunteer-led community groups.

You can read RCN's response to the consultation [here](#)

## Benefits to Rise in Line with Inflation by Up to 6%

The Chancellor also used his *Autumn Statement* to announce that a range of Social Security benefits would rise in line with inflation. Inflation-linked DWP benefits, tax credits and benefits administered by HMRC will rise by 6.7% from April 2024; in line with the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rate of inflation in September 2023. The Basic and New State Pensions will be uprated 8.5% in line with earnings, as part of the "triple lock" guarantee on pensions. Benefits that will rise include Universal Credit; Job Seekers' Allowance; Personal Independence Payment, and Child Benefit ([click here for more details](#))

Whilst campaigners and advice organisations welcomed the rise, they expressed concern that the true rate of inflation for poorer families was much higher than 6.7%. Food and energy inflation has been running at rates significantly above 6.7%. This has had a much greater impact on poorer households as they spend a higher proportion of their budget on food and energy bills.

If you need advice on Social Security benefit entitlements or if you need advice with managing debt, contact [Advice NI](#).

## Anti-Poverty Network Campaign to Scrap the Two Child Limit

The NI Anti-Poverty Network and Save the Children have launched a campaign calling on MPs to scrap the “two child limit.” The measure, introduced in 2017, restricts entitlement to benefits for families who have a third or subsequent child after April 2017. These families are denied £3,235 per year per child, compared to families who have a third or subsequent child born before that date. The End Child Poverty Coalition’s research is based on figures obtained from the Department for Communities following a Freedom of Information request. The research shows that nearly 45,000 children in Northern Ireland live in families affected by the two-child limit. NIAPN and Save the Children are calling on all Northern Ireland MPs to back their campaign to scrap the two-child limit in advance of the General Election next year. In the meantime, the campaign will be lobbying the Assembly to introduce mitigations to protect families from the two-child limit as recommended by the Welfare Mitigations Review.

For more detail on the research and the campaign, click [here](#).

## Information Commissioner Questions DWP Plans to Monitor Bank Accounts of Claimants

The Information Commissioner’s Office has raised concerns about the lack of appropriate safeguards for claimants if new powers to monitor claimants’ bank accounts are introduced. *The [Data Protection and Digital Information Bill - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament](#)* covers a wide range of issues regarding data protection and digital information. Controversially, the Bill will confer powers on the Department of Work and Pensions to monitor the bank accounts of any claimant for purposes of detecting fraud or overpayment of benefits. Without needing to show any suspicion of wrongdoing by claimants, DWP will use the new powers to require banks and financial organisations to identify benefit claimants with more than £16,000 in savings or who claim from abroad for longer than the four-week limit.

The ICO has warned that the Bill was not “sufficiently tightly drafted” to protect individuals from “arbitrary interference.” MPs have also voiced concerns that the legislation could allow DWP to investigate the bank accounts of a

considerable proportion of the population. The move has also been criticised by human rights and data privacy NGOs.

The legislation's implications for claimants in Northern Ireland are unclear. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) has produced a briefing which states that personal data protection falls under the scope of "civil rights" as part of the Good Friday Agreement. They believe that the right to personal data protection afforded by EU law, by which the UK was bound on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020, falls within the scope of the "Non-diminution Commitment" in Article 2 of the *Windsor Framework*. NIHRC has called on the Secretary of State to review and table amendments to ensure none of the data protection rights contained in EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and other EU data protection laws are weakened or removed via the Bill.

To read more detail on the NIHRC's view of the Bill and the need for protection of citizens' rights here resulting from the non-diminution commitment under the *Windsor Framework*, click [here](#).

The Bill has moved to the House of Lords Committee Stage after its second reading in the House of Lords.

## Local Housing Allowance Rates Rise at Last

UK Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, announced a rise to Local Housing Allowance rates in his *Autumn Statement* in November. The Chancellor announced that rates would rise after four years when rates had been frozen. Local Housing Allowance is set at 30% of the market rent in a local housing market area. It (in theory) is designed to support people who need housing benefit to access the bottom 30% of private rented sector properties in their housing market area. The new rates apply from April 2024 and will be based on the size and type of property to which a household is entitled. The 30th percentile rent for properties of assorted sizes within each local "Broad Rental Market Area" (BRMA) is based on rents surveyed in the year to September 2023. Campaigners and housing charities such as Housing Rights NI have been calling for an uplift in Local Housing Allowance rates for several years now.

The increase will provide some relief for many private renters across rural communities where the private rented sector is the only option. However, in the medium- to long-term, more homes of all types will be required to address the huge levels of housing need and homelessness that have developed over past decades, and which are blighting people's lives.

## Move to Universal Credit Causing Problems for Farmers

Advice NI, Rural Support and the Ulster Farmers Union have again highlighted the problems caused for farmers and farm families as the remaining legacy benefit claimants move to Universal Credit (UC). Families claiming tax credits are receiving letters telling them their claim is ending and setting a deadline by which they should claim Universal Credit. The problem with the new system is that farmers' incomes, like many other self-employed people, can fluctuate widely throughout the year. For example, there will be months where there are significant expenses but little or no income until livestock are sold. UC is calculated based on monthly income and expenditure, so in some months claimants may not qualify for a payment.

A further problem is the application of the "minimum income floor" which assumes that all claimants have earned the equivalent of the national minimum wage that month – even in a month in which a farmer may have earned little income. The direct effect of this will be to reduce or remove entirely a benefit which was supposed to support people to be in work; based on an assumption of a minimum income which the person does not earn. UC also requires self-employed people to report their cash-in and cash-out figures monthly (previously required annually), adding to the burden of paperwork for struggling farmers.

The three organisations have called for the following changes to be made:

- Actual earnings to be used in the Universal Credit assessment as opposed to the artificial assumed 'minimum income floor.'
- The annualised administration of Universal Credit for the self-employed in line with the tax year as opposed to the requirement for monthly reporting of cash-in and cash-out.
- The creation of a dedicated independent support service for the self-employed to assist and support them to navigate Universal Credit.



## Consultation on Victims & Survivors Strategy

The Executive Office (TEO) recently launched a public consultation on a new *Victims and Survivors Strategy* to replace the first *Victims Strategy*, launched in 2009. The draft *Strategy* has been developed by TEO in co-operation with the Victims and Survivors' Service, the Community and Voluntary Sector and a variety of stakeholders, including funded groups and individual victims and survivors. The original strategy had been intended to guide work on victims and survivors for ten years but had been extended because of various Assembly and Executive collapses.

The Vision of the draft *Strategy* is “A trauma-informed society that addresses the needs of victims and survivors.” The principles and values that will guide the *Strategy* include: victim-centred; trauma-informed; collaboration and partnership; responsive to changing needs; evidence-based; trust and confidence; and empowering. The *Strategy* acknowledges that one of the most important priorities for victims and survivors is truth and justice. It acknowledges the opposition from all political parties to the Legacy Act 2023 and its negative impact on victims and survivors. The document commits to continued engagement with the Irish and UK Governments to ensure they are aware of the needs of victims and survivors and the potential impact on individuals and communities of failing to meet those needs.

The consultation homepage acknowledges that this draft *Strategy* has been developed in the absence of Ministers and will be subject to Ministerial decisions. It remains to be seen how the new Executive Office Ministers and their respective parties react to the draft *Strategy*.

The consultation closes for comments on 13<sup>th</sup> March. For full details, click [here](#).



## Housing Executive Builds First New Homes in a Generation.

The Housing Executive began its first new-build housing development in over 25 years before Christmas. They are building six homes in North Belfast to the Passive House standard, as a pilot scheme using modern methods of construction. This means that a significant part of the construction happens off-site in a factory; the house components are then transported and assembled on-site. This method of construction significantly reduces the duration of the building phase. Homes constructed to Passive House standard must be super-insulated and airtight and use a heat recovery system to re-circulate heat into the home as well as using solar energy for heating. Although more expensive to build at the outset, over the lifetime of the home heating costs are ultra-low compared to conventional fossil fuel-heated homes.

Whilst six houses are a drop in the ocean when compared to the chronic housing need in North Belfast and across Northern Ireland, this development signals the intention of the Housing Executive to return to developing new homes. For further information on the scheme, click [here](#).

## Rural Housing Association Secures Finance for Three Hundred Homes

Rural Housing Association, the housing association that develops social housing in rural communities, announced a significant financial investment from Danske Bank for new-build homes in rural areas. Rural Housing Association aims to use this investment to deliver more than three hundred homes over the next seven years. Housing Associations must raise a proportion of the finance needed to develop new social housing through private borrowing. This private finance is then used alongside housing association grant funding received from the Department for Communities to build new social homes. The arrangement of this finance facility enables the Association to concentrate on finding sites to meet housing need across Northern Ireland.

Although private finance has been secured, Rural Housing Association still needs to acquire sites, secure planning approval, and develop the social homes that are desperately needed across rural communities. As regular readers of *Policy Link* will know, the Housing Executive's target for new-build social homes in rural areas has been missed in eight of the past nine years, as levels of homelessness and housing need have soared. The Rural Housing Association now has a long-term agreement in place that will enable it to raise the required private finance

element. On average, if this level of new-build can be achieved, over seven years approximately forty houses per annum will be delivered and will contribute to meeting the rural new-build target.

For more information on this story, click [here](#).

## Independent Review of Education Reports

The Independent Review of Education – a commitment in the *New Decade New Approach* document in 2020 – delivered its final report in December after two years of stakeholder engagement and deliberations. The Review was set up to consider all aspects of education policy and delivery. The Terms of Reference for the Review included: securing greater efficiency in delivery costs; raising standards; access to the curriculum for all pupils; and the prospects of moving towards a single education system. The report is in three volumes, addresses a wide range of issues and makes recommendations for reform, some of which include:

- Expansion of early years education with up to twenty hours for two-year-olds and twenty-two and a half hours for three-year-olds.
- Failings are identified in provision for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and the Review recommended eventual replacement of classroom assistants with fully qualified teachers.
- Unviable small schools are to be closed on an area-by-area basis with a Special Commission set up to address this with a ten-year implementation period.
- The school leaving age should be increased from sixteen to eighteen years.
- Vocational pathways for pupils should begin from age fourteen.
- The Review identifies an immediate need for an uplift in education budgets by £291m per annum.
- Schools from different sectors to merge to become new jointly managed community schools.
- Regarding transfer from primary to post primary move from a single test to a pupil profile approach.

The Review has made some radical recommendations which the incoming Education Minister Paul Givan will need to consider and respond to. The Department of Education Permanent Secretary, Dr Mark Browne, welcomed publication of the Review's report in December. He said that Department officials would:

*“Assess the findings and recommendations and make the necessary preparations to consult widely on the report to inform an incoming Minister and Executive.”*

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