

# Response ID ANON-4S4R-ZJGY-H

Submitted to Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure and Support Policy Framework  
Submitted on 2024-02-09 11:59:30

## Section 1 - Introduction

1 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

## Section 1 - Organisation Details

2 What is the name of your organisation?

Organisation name:

Rural Community Network

3 Does your organisation operate more in urban or rural areas?

More rural

4 Which of the following best describes your organisation?

Voluntary and Community Sector organisation

## Section 1 - Voluntary and Community Sector

5 If you are answering on behalf of a voluntary and community organisation, which of the following best describes your organisation?

Community organisation

If Other, please specify below::

## Section 2 - Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government

### Section 2 cont'd - Supporting the Sector's relationship with Government

6 The Joint Forum has proposed a draft framework of values and practices as a foundation for a future Concordat. To what extent do you agree with these values and practices as a way of supporting the relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector?

Values and Practices - Value 1: Accountability:

Agree

Values and Practices - Value 2: Active Participation:

Agree

Values and Practices - Value 3: Social Justice:

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Values and Practices - Value 4: Independence:

Agree

Values and Practices - Value 5: Collaboration:

Agree

Values and Practices - Value 6: Sustainability:

Agree

Please share anything you would like add specific to each of the individual values: Accountability:

Active Participation:

Social Justice:

RCN welcomes the commitment to act with due regard to statutory Section 75 and Rural Need commitments. However, the application of the Rural Needs Act by duty holders has not produced the outcomes rural communities had hoped to see when the Act was introduced. This section should also reference the additional challenges people from Section 75 categories face when they live in rural communities as well as any other intersectionality.

Independence:

RCN welcomes the commitment under this value to "Support the sector's capacity to challenge, innovate and add value to public policy and decision-making". It is welcome that DfC commit to the important role of the VCS in challenging and innovating in relation to public policy and decision making

Collaboration:

Sustainability:

RCN welcomes the reference to climate justice. DfC and other statutory funders need to acknowledge that transition to a zero-carbon economy must be a just transition underpinned by social justice. There are additional challenges in rural communities in reducing carbon with dependence on cars, poor public transport and active travel infrastructure and older poorly insulated homes heated by oil or solid fuel. DAERA and other Departments need to reframe some of these change processes in a more positive way. Many of the steps we need to take towards net zero could lead to change for the better across society, for example, reducing carbon by phasing out fossil fuel heating systems in buildings should lead to an improvement in air quality. Citizen education, engagement and participation needs to go hand in hand if we are to meet emissions reduction targets and RCN believes that co-designing solutions at community and household level will play a key role in making the transition. We welcome references to climate justice and working practices that are socially just and ask that DfC and DAERA consider how this is implemented in practice across the VCS

7 Please let us know if you think there are gaps in the proposed framework of values and practices or anything additional that you would like to see included:

Gaps in proposed framework of values and practices:

8 The Joint Forum has been considering options to ensure that a future Concordat/agreement leads to meaningful change and an improved relationship between the sectors. To what extent do you agree that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in compliance with the concordat values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities?

Disagree

9 The Joint Forum is keen to hear views on what the ambition and scope of a new Concordat/agreement should be between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Please share any thoughts, ideas or challenges below::

To date the work of the Joint Forum has been significantly limited by a lack of commitment and inconsistent attendance by department representatives and its ambition. It should be a place of debate, challenge, discussion and collaboration as well as giving space for information exchange. Over the years it has really suffered from changes in departmental representatives. At times departmental representatives that were attending were not at the level to make or influence Departmental decisions. If the joint forum is to be a vehicle that connects the sectors, it has to do so with the right people at the table.

RCN is unconvinced that a legal duty on Ministers to act in compliance with Concordat values & practices will make much difference to decision making. A key challenge is that Departments and Ministers will prioritise statutory commitments as there will be immediate legal public health and safety or other consequences if statutory commitments are ignored or set aside. Much of the core funding provided by DfC and DAERA to VCS is contingent on Departments continuing to secure a base level of funding through the block grant. If public sector funding continues to see the same levels of austerity as over the past decade, then our fear is that core funding for VCS infrastructure support will continue to reduce relative to overall level of need.

10 The 2011 Concordat was framed as an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector. The Joint Forum believes that a future Concordat should apply to a wider range of "civil society" organisations: a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector). This is also sometimes called the "third sector" or the "social sector". There is some debate around the term we should use when we speak about this broader sector. Which would be your preferred term?

Civil Society

If Other, please specify below::

### Section 3 - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

11 The draft framework proposes a vision for infrastructure support. To what extent do you agree with this vision?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

### Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

12 To what extent do you agree with this Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome?

Agree

13 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities:

Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leaders work together around shared issues:

Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Sector leadership is diverse and representative of the sector and communities:

Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated:

Agree

Agree leadership supporting outcomes - Public policy and decision making (central and local government) is informed by evidence from the sector:

Strongly Agree

14 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments leadership and advocacy outcome:

There is a need to consider an outcome aimed at succession planning for leadership in the sector. We have seen significant churn in the VCS in recent years with, in some cases, a serious loss in institutional knowledge that has led to closure. Founder syndrome is a significant factor in the VCS and support is needed to allow those who have founded and led an organisation hand it on to a new leader.

RCN believes it is important to disaggregate data between larger and smaller organisations to separate out voluntary from community organisations to enable more detailed analysis of the sector.

The sector has to be adequately resourced to undertake policy and influencing work, as it is often additional to existing target and workloads. An example is the work undertaken by RCN on the implications of Brexit. The costs to us in relation to time, travel and staff and board energy was immense. RCN staff and board members have attended meetings in Dublin, London and Birmingham as well as travelling to meet delegations from across the EU and UK who travelled to Northern Ireland. The work put into giving evidence at the House of Lords, The NI Affairs Committee and the North South Ministerial Forum as well meetings with delegations from NIO and others was never factored into our current contracts.

### Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

15 To what extent do you agree with this Volunteering headline outcome?

Agree

16 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued:

Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Voluntary management committees can access the support they need:

Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated:

Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit and manage volunteers:

Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Volunteer management skills are developed within organisations:

Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - Volunteer opportunities are accessible:

Strongly Agree

Agree volunteering supporting outcomes - People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities:

Strongly Agree

17 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments volunteering outcome:

We welcome the support for volunteering and the focus on volunteering in the Framework. In RCN's experience the vast majority of community and voluntary organisations in rural NI are managed and staffed by volunteers. There are relatively few paid staff in rural VCS organisations outside of infrastructure support organisations at sub regional and regional level. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations with more work delivered in the evenings and weekends leading to less focus on HR/staff management and more focus on governance, good practice and volunteer management. RCN, along with many other rural infrastructure organisations, has seen a decline in volunteering, partly due to the pandemic and the fact that the CVS workforce, as well as being voluntary, is an older cohort in rural community groups. These factors need to be

taken into consideration as the new Support Framework is developed.

### Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

18 To what extent do you agree with this Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome?

Agree

19 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs:  
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to work effectively within a changing funding and regulatory framework:  
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work:  
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income:  
Strongly Agree

Agree capacity supporting outcomes - Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets:  
Strongly Agree

20 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments capacity and resilience outcome:

RCN would suggest that in addition to these supporting outcomes the Framework should add a further outcome around networking so that organisations are supported to learn from each other and share best practice. Organisations should also be supported to develop partnerships and collaboration. The Framework should also support mentoring between community organisations where new staff and volunteers can learn from more experienced people through mentoring schemes.

### Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

21 To what extent do you agree with this Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome?

Agree

22 To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks:  
Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement with government:  
Strongly Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Sector-led partnerships support local resilience and civil contingencies arrangements:  
Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence:  
Agree

Agree collaboration supporting outcomes - Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact:  
Strongly Agree

23 If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Comments collaboration outcome:

A key challenge facing the VCS is the overreliance by Government on 'tendering and procurement' which encourages competition rather than collaboration. If the VCS is to become more collaborative then new creative ways of encouraging collaboration will need to be employed. Whilst we accept the need to ensure value for money DfC needs to challenge other Departments when more collaborative approaches to commissioning services and support from the VCS are appropriate.

### Section 3 cont'd - Vision and Headline Outcomes (for infrastructure support)

24 Are there any key elements or themes missing from either the vision or headline outcomes?

Not Answered

If yes, please provide further information::

#### Section 4 - Delivering the Ambition

25 The Department has suggested five key areas for delivery against the proposed outcomes. To what extent do you agree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below. Note that additional sections of this survey will allow space for more comments on the detail of these delivery areas.:

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

26 To what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support?

Agree

27 To what extent do you agree with the need for three types of local infrastructure support?

Agree local infrastructure support - Community infrastructure organisations (sub-regional):

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Agree local infrastructure support - Community infrastructure organisations (sub-sectoral):

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Agree local infrastructure support - Volunteer centres:

Agree

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

28 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below.:

RCN welcomes the acknowledgment that a focus on rural need is required as one of the key elements of the regional infrastructure delivery partnership. RCN has successfully delivered the "rural element" of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme over the past 13 years in partnership with NICVA, CO3 and CENI. We believe a specific focus on rural need is appropriate as a key element of the Department's approach to regional infrastructure support.

RCN believes that a similar focus on rural need is required at the community infrastructure organisation sub-regional level. The RNIA published by the Department quotes the engagement survey undertaken by DfC as part of the consultation which showed that the top three priorities for infrastructure support and the top 5 operational areas of support for the next 3-5 years were the same for both urban and rural areas. RCN believes that how this infrastructure support is delivered at sub-regional level is significantly distinct and merits a "rural needs" lens.

As discussed earlier in this response the vast majority of community and voluntary organisations in rural NI are managed and staffed by volunteers. There are relatively few paid staff in rural VCS organisations outside of infrastructure support organisations at sub regional and regional level. This shapes the nature of community development support for rural organisations with more work delivered in evenings with less focus on HR, staff management and more focus on governance, good practice, and volunteer management. The CVS in rural areas has seen a decline in volunteering, partly due to the pandemic and the fact that the CVS workforce, as well as being voluntary, is an older demographic. These factors need to be taken into consideration at sub regional level as the new Support Framework is developed.

RCN notes the intention of the Department to work with local government to redesign the community development element of the Community Support Programme. We would expect that the VCS would be involved in co-design of this process and that any redesigned programme would be subject to full public consultation including Rural Needs Impact Assessment. Any new programme which emerges needs to ensure it complements the VCS infrastructure support framework and avoids duplication. The voluntary nature of the VCS in rural communities also needs to be taken into account during the redesign of the Community Support Programme delivered by local Councils as it has fundamental implications for how community planning is delivered in partnership with rural communities.

RCN suggests that DfC should also consider how investment in community development support by other Departments, whether DAERA, TEO (in relation to ethnic minority communities, LBGQT+), DfI (in relation to Community Transport) and Dept. of Health is seeking to support and complement work undertaken through the VCS Infrastructure Support Framework and the CVS more generally.

Multi-disciplinary teams (including a high ratio of social workers) are currently being developed by Health Trusts to support struggling GP Practices across NI. Six years since the pilots in Down and Derry began, there is great concern in the CVS that social workers employed in the MDTs are undermining our sector which they should be working with to develop community solutions to improve patient health. The MDT model deliberately avoids direct investment in the CVS. Statutory funding of large numbers of social workers and social work assistants in community worker roles is leading to

duplication. This would be much better delegated to the CVS who are in the best position to grow sustainable, volunteer led community groups. DfC, DAERA, PHA and DoH should all work together with Councils, Trusts and the CVS to work out collectively how we can all support the NHS and reduce ill health at community level in the most efficient and effective manner.

There is a degree of overlap between sub regional & sub sectoral community support organisations. Sub sectoral support organisations need to work together with sub regional organisations to share expertise and meet support needs at the local level. For example, many womens' groups in rural areas are part of the Rural Support Networks in their area. Some Rural Support Networks work to support groups across several Council areas and have also extended their work into market towns depending on the particular projects they are involved in. So DfC may need to consider in more detail how sub regional and sub sectoral organisations work across Northern Ireland. There are also differences across regions in regard to sub regional and sub sectoral support organisations.

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

29 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the leadership and advocacy headline outcome?

Agree

30 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities leadership outcome:

RCN believes an indicative priority for investment to promote effective succession planning should be included under this outcome. Leadership in the sector is ageing and further action to support renewal of CVS leadership could be included here. Post pandemic many people have left the CVS to seek more secure employment in other sectors. How do we retain the talent and skills of those who have 'honed their craft' in the sector over the years? Not all staff will choose to remain working in the CVS throughout their career but the retention of talent in recent years has become a real challenge. Terms and conditions in the CVS have not kept pace with inflation and have fallen below terms and conditions in the public sector. This has led to a move to the public sector by many people previously employed in the CVS and has prevented the recruitment of staff from the public sector into the CVS.

A further indicative priority for investment would be to encourage networking and effective advocacy through supporting initiatives which share good practice with CVS organisations in the UK and Ireland and further afield where appropriate. This would promote best practice and learning from community voluntary organisations across the world. It would also support advocacy and effective representation on reserved matters affecting the CVS which require a whole of UK approach.

This was demonstrated recently with work done to lobby the Financial Services Authority in the UK as a result of difficulties many grass roots groups were facing in undertaking their charity banking. These concerns and case studies were identified by sub regional community partners and communicated to RCN and NICVA. NICVA, along with ACRE and NCVO then sought the support of the various UK Charity Commissions to re-establish the banking forum convened by the Charity Finance Group. At time of writing, it is hoped that the banking forum will be re-established to seek solutions to charity banking issues experienced at local level as unintended consequences of anti-fraud and money laundering measures introduced by the banking sector.

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

31 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the volunteering headline outcome?

Agree

32 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities volunteering outcome:

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

33 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the core capacity and resilience headline outcome?

Agree

34 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities capacity outcome:

The Framework needs a focus on peer mentoring, knowledge exchange and best practice networking. Collaboration and partnership building are also important areas requiring further development.

As well as the training programmes and resources listed additional priorities include:

- Community development theory, values and practice
- Anti-discrimination training
- Recruiting, supporting and managing volunteers
- Community profiling and research at community level
- Advocacy, lobbying and policy analysis
- Community relations/good relations/anti racism
- Managing conflict and mediation skills

## Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

35 To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the collaboration and partnership headline outcome?

Agree

36 Can you suggest any other priorities?

Other investment priorities collaboration outcome:

RCN broadly agrees with the priorities included but if DfC wants to further develop collaboration across the VCS and between VCS and government/council that will require investment. Collaboration is built on developing relationships which needs to be facilitated. There can be a tendency within VCS organisations to focus on contract delivery as time spent on developing relationships may not be resourced or may not quickly lead to projects being developed. So this collaboration which may develop important new insights and ideas for all partners needs to be invested in.

Effective participation in cross sectoral partnerships needs to be adequately resourced to remain sustainable long term. This should include clear information on induction (where required), clear indication of time commitment (meetings and preparation time), clear terms of reference for what the cross sectoral work will achieve and the added value anticipated from CVS representatives involvement. In too many cases these crucial enablers of effective participation are absent. A recent example has been the Southern HSCT Area Integrated Partnership Board (AIPB) which has been established to create space for service users and carers and CVS representatives to sit with health service professionals and local councils to plan health service delivery at Trust level. This pilot AIPB has, so far, failed to adequately resource, induct or support the nominated CVS representatives. CVS representatives reported that they had no induction process, they were overwhelmed by the voices of health professionals, and they doubted the influence they could have. In addition, they were not asked about how their time at these intensive meetings was going to be covered within their budgets. Our sector, which is generally under-resourced, believes that the 'opportunity cost' of placing the CVS "at the table" needs to be recognised and resourced.

A missed opportunity in the last investment round was the lack of interaction between CIF funded groups, Neighbourhood Renewal groups, local delivery partners and regional infrastructure organisations. There were few opportunities to meet and learn from each other. This did happen, to an extent during the pandemic when groups at all levels came together in adversity. This led to the development of new working relationships, joint working and knowledge exchange which has been very powerful.

The strategic stakeholder forum needs to be clearly defined and build on the work and experience of the Joint Forum.

## Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

37 To what extent do you agree with this commitment?

Neither Agree nor Disagree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

RCN accepts that the Department is committing to renewing investment in sector infrastructure support but officials are currently exploring/rationalising funding across many of its programmes that support the VCS including:

- RISP Generic
- RISP Faith
- RISP – Women's
- Neighbourhood Renewal
- Sub regional network support in both urban and rural communities
- People and Place
- Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme
- Community Asset Transfer (CAT)

This is a significant change programme if all these funding streams are to be merged into this VCS Infrastructure Support Programme. Whilst RCN would not disagree with many of the priorities for investment we are concerned about the level of financial support offered to VCS infrastructure organisations which has been either static or in decline for over a decade. Employment and running costs have increased substantially and there appears to be a focus on income generation which can be at odds with social justice values which organisations are committed to. If the VCS is increasingly expected to take on ownership of, and develop, assets on a trading basis then significant thought needs to be given to how these models will impact on disadvantaged communities or individuals. Failure to consider these issues of social justice at this stage risks undermining the sector's commitment to work with the most disadvantaged and lead to a loss of legitimacy in wider society. Investment in the VCS infrastructure support framework will be required long term as many of our groups operate in areas of market failure and provide facilities and services that will never be viable on a market basis.

DAERA investment has been vitally important to the community development support infrastructure across rural Northern Ireland over the past decade at both sub regional and regional level. However the level of support offered by DAERA has been limited. RCN believes DfC and DAERA need to commit to equity of investment between urban and rural VCS support. The limited level of investment has resulted in rural infrastructure support organisations increasingly under pressure to generate funding from other sources to remain viable. The level of revenue resource funding made available from DAERA has almost halved in the past decade as contract delivery requirements have increased as have running costs. The end of the NI Rural Development Programme is, we believe, a threat to the future viability of rural community development and will have negative impacts on community and business development in rural communities. RCN and the RSNS are frustrated at the lack of progress on DAERA's Rural Business and Community Investment Fund which was announced by Minister Poots via a Ministerial Statement to the Assembly on 31.01.22. DAERA committed a budget of £1M to Rural Business and Community Investment Fund in year 2023-24 to be spent largely on pilot initiatives. This compares with a budget of £70M in the 2014-2020 period for

the previous LEADER programme in Northern Ireland. By way of comparison, in October 2023, Ministers Heather Humphreys and Joe O'Brien committed 44 Million Euros to LEADER in the Republic of Ireland for 2024. We hope that the return of the Assembly will lead to a reinvigoration of efforts to implement a replacement programme for rural development in Northern Ireland which rural community infrastructure organisations can support.

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

38 To what extent do you agree that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

RCN agrees there is a need to improve charity regulation to support positive outcomes for the sector. We support the implementation of recommendations arising from the Independent Review of Charity Regulation in NI and believe a de minimis threshold of £20,000 annual income is implemented before registration with the Charity Commission is required.

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

39 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

RCN would like to see further work undertaken as part of the implementation of the review to explore what full cost recovery means in practice for organisations at both regional and sub regional levels. RCN also believes that further work is required to map how resource allocation translates to services commissioned as part of any tendering processes. In our experience new outputs have been added to contracts without a recognition of the additional resource required to deliver them. This has particular significance in rural communities where additional travel time and travel costs for staff or volunteers can accrue which must then be met from somewhere else in the organisation's resources.

RCN strongly supports the call for proportionate bureaucracy in the funding relationship between government and the sector. There is over regulation and micro-management by some Departments and funders which results in the 'discretion to manage' budgets being taken out of the hands of the Trustees of the charity and left with the funder.

RCN also strongly believes that the VCS needs to employ all staff at the rate of the Real Living Wage. We cannot be a sector that claims social justice as one of our values whilst paying staff on low wage rates in a cost of living crisis.

#### Section 4 cont'd - Delivering the Ambition

40 To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

Strongly Agree

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below::

There is a need for greater differentiation within the sector. Rural and urban have different contexts, the border region adds a further layer of complexity with cross border working vital in that region. The faith sector provides almost 40% of volunteering for the community and provides vital support in many rural locations, yet this Framework largely ignores the need for infrastructure support for faith based VCS organisations. These groups have unique support needs and are very often over looked because they are largely self-sufficient relying on their faith communities for funding rather than seeking investment from independent or statutory funders.

#### Annex 3 - Statutory Assessments

41 Do you agree with the conclusions of the Equality Screening exercise?

Don't Know

If no, please provide your reasons::

RCN welcomes the acknowledgment in the screening that:

"differential support needs exist within organisations across the sector relating to income levels, geographic coverage, work focus, rural/urban locations regardless of the specific group of people being supported by the organisation. " As already discussed in our response the VCS in rural areas is volunteer managed and led and many volunteers are older people who face barriers to volunteering or who may be discouraged from volunteering in future.

RCN accepts that more support is required for LGBTQi+ communities outside Belfast. In our work which has offered some support to rural Pride festivals, which are mostly run by young people there are serious fears re. homophobic and transphobic discrimination and violence against young LGBTQi+ people.

RCN welcomes the consideration to multiple identity in the screening document. We would add that Section 75 groups living in rural communities are likely to face additional barriers accessing support and services due to barriers associated with distance, poor public transport infrastructure and less well



developed broadband and mobile phone connectivity in some rural areas.

42 A Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been completed in line with the Department's duty under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The needs of people in rural areas have been identified and taken into consideration with the aim of providing balanced infrastructure support provision across all geographies. Do you think the proposed draft framework presents any other issues for rural communities?

No

If no, please provide further comments::

RCN would make the following comments in relation to the Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

We welcome that the Department has identified the following rural needs impacts:

(rural organisations have the) Potential for greater isolation and less networked than urban organisations;

- Dispersed rural communities are often more difficult to support in terms of infrastructure, particularly in terms of convening people and sharing information and skills

- Urban/Rural Digital divide with many rural areas experiencing poor or even no access to broadband and mobile coverage services

- Transport and accessibility issues with regional provision generally in Belfast (also confirmation of the benefit of digital/online delivery options)

- Transport issues/expenses relating to volunteers

- Need for the voice of rural organisations to be heard and an understanding that there is a diversity of rural organisations and there may not be one share (sic) view or shared issues.

- "Levelling up" required between urban and rural organisations.

We would add the following rural needs impacts should be considered by the Department:

- An older volunteer profile in rural CVS therefore an older workforce as the rural CVS is so dependent on volunteers.

- A consequence of the older volunteer profile may be that, even where broadband infrastructure is adequate, digital skills in the rural CVS may be lacking

- Many CVS groups across rural communities come from a faith perspective which is not acknowledged in the consultation document or RNIA.

- Prevalence of community relations issues in some rural areas where patterns of land holding are long established and have resulted in communities which are deeply segregated.

- Older community halls which are less likely to be accessible and may be more difficult to heat with higher costs to transition to low/zero carbon heating.

- The additional challenges in rural communities around meeting zero carbon targets and the need to consider how those discussions are facilitated at community level.

RCN welcomes the fact that future infrastructure support based on this policy framework will be designed in collaboration with DAERA.

Our view is that the RNIA should have considered how the VCS infrastructure support framework will complement and support the delivery of the Rural Business Community Investment Fund developed by DAERA in partnership with rural stakeholders to replace the EU funded Rural Development Programme. RCN, NIRWN and RSNs all played important roles in supporting the roll out of the NIRDP with RSNs providing a crucial support to enable successful applications to the programme from rural groups.

The rural sector, regional and sub regional, (Rural Community Network and Rural Support Networks) play a significant role within the VCS Infrastructure supporting the CVS across rural areas and market towns, reaching some 3100 groups and organisations, providing them with direct support.

The Rural Support Networks completed an independent evaluation, for the 3 year period of 2021 to 2023, focusing on their performance and impact. The report states:

"An impact survey completed by some 1095 groups is a strong evidence base in support of the role of role and impact of the RSN structure. The ability to access a range of services to support and empower rural communities is welcomed by groups, enabling them to sustain their local areas while learning from others and building connections at a local, sub regional and regional level."

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