

RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORK (RCN)

2022/2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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



Background

Rural Community Network is a voluntary membership-based organisation supporting rural communities across the region. RCN works 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, peacebuilding, strategic planning, consultation, mediation and facilitation.

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



Chairperson's Forward

Over the past year the work of RCN Board and staff have consolidated our position as an infrastructure support service to rural groups, and a place where the voice of rural communities is both articulated and amplified to those who are seeking to develop and implement policy.

For the past number of years RCN has provided consistent and constant support to our groups, as the world around us changed. Post-Covid recovery has been long and difficult for some of the rural community groups we work with. The cost-of-living crisis has plunged many communities back into emergency responses for their localities and post-Brexit uncertainty, and changes to funding streams, have created a perfect storm for the sector.

RCN has provided policy responses, research, funding opportunities, governance support and networking opportunities to those that they serve. This annual report will highlight some of that work.

As RCN embarks on a new strategic plan and modernisation programme the current Board of Trustees have generously agreed to remain in position until the new arrangements are formally agreed and in place. We look forward to engagement with our colleagues in the sector, and our member groups as we proceed with this process.



Chairperson's Forward

In the past year, we have engaged on the national and international stage working across Europe and the UK with groups who do similar work in rural communities. This networking, at a strategic level, has brought with it new energy and new ideas which we are bringing back to local groups in this region.

We continue to be mindful of the changes that are occurring in rural NI with the exit from the EU. RCN has worked hard to represent the voices of its membership in meetings with the House of Lords, The NI Affairs Committee and with EU, Irish and UK delegations. Meetings with NIO, Government Departments and Councils continue as we proceed without an Assembly. RCN staff have worked hard to engage with our membership to ensure they are bringing the voice of the sector and all its nuances to these tables.

RCN has an ambition to remain current, relevant, and accessible to those whom it serves, we can only do that with the support of rural communities right across the region.

We urge you, in this coming year, to engage with RCN, its staff and Board to help us to shape the strategic plan that will meet the needs of rural groups and will support thriving rural communities.



Trustees' Report

RCN continues to operate in a consortium with NICVA, CENI and CO3 in the extension period of the Generic strand of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP). RCN is 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 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. We have also secured additional contracts and tenders to undertake work in relation to poverty research, facilitation, housing, 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 fifth aim is concerned with internal systems and resourcing for the Network and is reported at the end of this document.



Trustees' Report

Key figures from this year for RCN Activities. UK and Republic of Ireland work we have done:

- EU-UK follow up committee of European Economic and Social Committee
- RCN remains connected to European Rural community Alliance, European Rural Parliament, and Scottish Rural Action
- 5G New Thinking Consortium (UK wide)
- Shared Island - part of a panel of speakers x 4 events
- Working on peace issues with the Department of Foreign Affairs
- House of Lords Sub Committee on Ireland/Ni Protocol x 3 events
- 2 engagements with NI Affairs Committee Representatives
- North South Ministerial Council meeting with international delegations.
- OECD Conference - 2 presentations
- British Irish Council events x 3 attended with presentations



Trustees' Report

Representation on 23 NI wide committees including:

- Integrated Care strategy CVS workstream
- Developing Governance working group
- Future Framework for Rural NI – DAERA
- DAERA Monitoring Committee for Rural Development
- CRC Annual Good Relations Week planning committee
- Human Rights Consortium Brexit working group
- Ad Hoc Group for North, South, East, West co-operation
- Women Addressing Paramilitarism Co-design group
- LGBTQ+ Strategy group convened by DfC
- Anti-poverty Strategy group convened by DfC
- Cost of Living Crisis Emergency Leadership group convened by DfC
- NI Standards Committee Voluntary Committee (NI Social Security Agency)



Trustees' Report

Key figures for this year.

120

New groups supported
with Heritage Lottery
investment through
'Ours to Share' project.

213

Zoom
sessions
hosted.

74

Workshops and
training session
organised.

521

Number of people
attending
reached by our
programmes.

200+

Meetings
facilitated.

45+

Meetings
Groups received
Social Value
Engine Impact
support.

31

Groups attended
impact support
training sessions.

9

Consultation
responses including
ongoing policy
representation on
rural issues.

4

Blogs written on
issues impacting
rural life.

10

Rural Brief
newsletter
editions.

3

Policy link
publications.

5000+

Social media
followers (Twitter,
LinkedIn,
Facebook etc.)

5

Beyond Belfast
peace and good
relations'
Practitioners
support sessions.

Strategic Aim 1

Empowering the Voice of Rural Communities

Peace and reconciliation: We represented the voice of our network at the following events. Every event we attended required work beforehand to contact and understand the voices of our membership so we could represent these at the committee.

- Shared Island part of a panel of speakers x 4 events
- Working on peace issues with the Department of Foreign Affairs
- House of Lords Sub Committee on Ireland/NI Protocol x 3 events
- 2 engagements with NI Affairs Committee Representatives
- North South Ministerial Council meeting with international delegations.

Health Sector transformation; C and V sector group: Health service reform in NI. We have developed the Rural Health Toolkit for NI in partnership with Centre for Rural Health in the UK. Rural Proofing as we continue health service reform remains a key element of our work. We have hosted the PHA Elevate training for our members supporting 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.

Rural Residents' Forum: Supporting the Forum to raise its voice on issues which impact rural tenants - through presentations to raise awareness of NIHE Corporate plan, rural new build targets, Personal Independence Payment and the Rural Needs Act.



Strategic Aim 1

Empowering the Voice of Rural Communities

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 ongoing pandemic.

Meetings with Secretary of State, EU Commission, Irish Government and UK Government and Departments MLAs: On issues such as the Collapse of NI Government, Rights agendas post-Brexit, 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.

Consultations (in the absence of NI Assembly) responded to include:

- DoH Review of Urgent and Emergency Care Services
- DoH Reform of Social Care
- Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Consumer Subgroup
- NHSCT Causeway Hospital Service Changes
- NIE Networks RP7
- NI Peatland Strategy EQIA
- NIHE Corporate Strategy
- NHSCT Acute Maternity Services

Strategic Aim 2

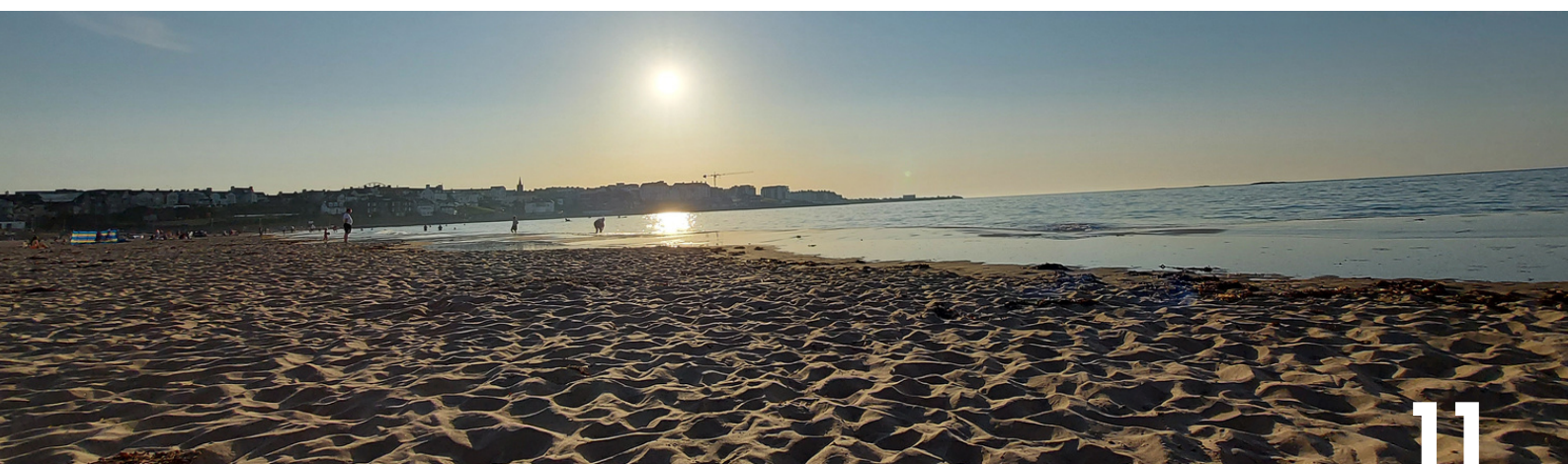
Promoting, supporting and celebrating community development practice in rural communities

- **Looking Back To Go Forward report:** A review of the learning from the use of the LEADER approach in NI.
- **Diploma:** 19 individuals have completed the NUI Galway Diploma in Community Development Practice and are due to graduate in November 2023.
- **Training for groups and individuals in:** Canva, Avoiding Blunders with Funders, NINIS statistics in local areas, Rural Needs Impact Assessment and Understanding the Rural Needs Act, CD practice and principles, meeting management and group work skills, managing conflict and mediation.
- **Webinars/Online engagement:** Social Enterprise opportunities in NI, Succession planning, Building Back Better?, Assembly Explained, Rural Sustainability Issues, Rural Digital Exclusion, The Bill of Rights and Community Responses to the Pandemic.
- **Connecting Rural:** RCN is a partner in the UK 5G New Thinking Project to empower rural and poorly connected communities to explore remote working, digital hubs and produced a report on the policy context for Digital remote working in NI. RCN also works on the Digital Inclusion group with Business in the Community and has advised Government of the roll out of project Stratum.
- **Community Leadership in the West:** Funded by National Lottery Community Fund in partnership with Fermanagh Trust and Holywell Trust to revive leadership and group training and support in community development and leadership in the rural West. 23 seminars, 26 networking events and over 40 group sessions run.
- **Ours to Share:** Networking and supporting groups to engage in the exploration of wider inclusion in their History and Heritage projects. We invested in projects with 20 groups to support them to engage wider and more diverse audiences in their projects.

Strategic Aim 3

Actively working towards an equitable and peaceful society

- **25 Years of the Good Friday Agreement:**
 - RCN Partnered with Corrymeela on a number of reflection exercises regarding the anniversary.
 - RCN staff spoke at a number of GFA 25 anniversary events hosted by our members across NI.
- **Hume Foundation:** RCN attended and spoke at several events hosted by the Hume Foundation on future of rural peace in this region.
- **Beyond Belfast Practitioners Support Group:** RCN ran 5 support meetings for practitioners who are largely working in isolation in their communities during the COVID pandemic. We undertook a strategic review of the forum and its work. We engaged rural practitioners in Trauma Informed Practice Training.
- **National Lottery Heritage Fund Shared History Fund:** Completed '100 Years of Change in NI' project that yielded: 32 seminars and supported 37 groups to take part in events and showcase work.
- **Government/Statutory engagement:** RCN continues to work 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.
- **NSEW A Hoc Group:** RCN continues to play an active part in this group of organisations who are supporting better relations between those working across these Islands in line with Strand 2 of the GFA.



Strategic Aim 4

Supporting rural communities to realise their potential and ambitions

- **5G New Thinking Digital Inclusion Project – Concluded:** We commissioned a paper on policy needed to enable greater use of digital hubs. Convened a number of site visits and networking meetings to alert funders, Government departments and community groups to the opportunities arising from Digital Hubs, Remote working and SMARTer towns and villages.
- **Covid and Cost of Living Crisis:** One to one support was given for groups applying for financial support for both Covid Recovery, and the Cost of Living Crisis, including Red Cross Hardship Fund, CFNI, DfC and Children In Need.
- **Networking:** Provided networking opportunities for practitioners and groups to share learning on the use of warm hubs, cost of living crisis and the distribution of food and energy aid.
- **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 Fund; Facilitating Effective Meetings; and Fundraising for Schools & PTAs.
- **Social Value Engine:** 45 groups have received support with access to and training on the use of the SVE. DAERA and DfC have both commissioned the use of SVE in evaluation processes. CRC have commissioned the SVE for core funded groups.
- **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.



Strategic Aim 5

Developing staff systems and resources, ensuring continuous improvement and development of RCN services.

- RCN Staff and Board have embarked on a strategic review of the Network its systems, resources, functionality and ambitions.
- Post covid, and with a changing rural landscape post – Brexit, Rural NI is changing and so are we. We have agreed to a root and branch review of what we do, what we aim to deliver and how we do that with our members, our board and our staff team.
- Over the coming year RCN will be embarking on an internal and external strategic review process which will hopefully see us emerge as a more robust, effective, efficient, well-resourced and well-supported organisation.



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