

RURAL SUPPORT

TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTORS' REPORT)

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

The Trustees present their annual report and audited financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2024.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the accounting policies set out in note 1 to the financial statements and comply with the charity's governing document, the Companies Act 2006 and "Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019)".

TRUSTEES' RESPONSIBILITIES STATEMENT

The Trustees are responsible for preparing the Trustee's report and the financial statements in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Practice in Ireland including the accounting standards issued by the Accounting Standards Board and published by Chartered Accountants Ireland.

The Trustees must not approve the financial statements unless they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the Trust and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the Trust for that period. In preparing these financial statements, the Trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the Charities SORP;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent; and,
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the Trust will continue in business.

The Trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that are sufficient to show and explain the charitable Trust's transactions and disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the Trust and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with current statutory requirements.

The Trustees are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the Trust and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Governing Document

Rural Support was initially established in Autumn 2001 to help farmers and rural dwellers in Northern Ireland who were affected by the severe crisis in the agricultural industry at the time.

The organisation is a charitable company limited by guarantee, incorporated on 1st March 2002 and is registered as a charity (NI102591). The company was established under a Memorandum of Association and is governed under its Articles of Association.

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Recruitment and Appointment of the Charity Board

The directors of the company are also charity trustees for the purposes of charity law and are known as members of the Rural Support Board.

The Rural Support Board has 13 members (who meet bi-monthly), representing a range of relevant experience/skillsets, including farmers, current or former members of YFCU, representatives from the business community, community/voluntary sector representatives and a health sector professional.

Trustee Induction and Training

Trustees are provided with induction and training when they join the Board and are provided with ongoing training throughout each year to promote best practice and to support them in their roles.

Risk Management

The Rural Support Board has conducted a review of the major risks to which the charity is exposed. A risk register has been established and is updated at least annually. Where appropriate, systems or procedures have been established to mitigate the risks the charity faces.

Significant external risks to funding have led to the development of a strategic plan which will allow for the diversification of funding and activities. Internal control risks are minimised by the implementation of procedures for authorisation of all transactions and projects. These procedures are periodically reviewed to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the charity.

Organisational Structure

The current staffing structure of Rural Support includes the following roles:

- Chief Executive (Full-time)
- Marketing Communications Co-Ordinator (Full-time)
- Volunteer and Human Resources Co-Ordinator (Full-time)
- Therapy Services Co-Ordinator (3 days/week)
- Head of Finance (60%/FTE)
- Finance and Executive Co-Ordinator (Full-time)
- Head of Development and Strategic Engagement (Full-time)
- Head of Farm Support (Full-time)
- Farm Support Co-Ordinator (Crisis - 4 days/week)
- Farm Support Co-Ordinator (Proactive Programmes: Part-time)
- Farm Support Co-Ordinator (Proactive Programmes: Full-time)
- Farm Support Co-Ordinator (Proactive Programmes: Full-time)
- Head of Social Farming and Innovation (Full-time)
- 2 x Social Farming Support Co-Ordinator (Full-time)
- Plough On Project Co-Ordinator (Full-time)
- Project Officer (Full-time)

Rural Support also has a team of 24 Farm Business Mentors who work on various projects surrounding farm business planning and rural stress to include dealing with finance/debt/technical issues and succession. Through one-to-one mentoring sessions they help farmers look at their options and support them to make realistic plans for the future of the farm business.

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They also support farmers and farming family members through a range of pro-active business and mental health awareness training programmes in the form of workshops and seminars that take place throughout the year.

There are also a number of Counselling Mentors and mental health specialists who work alongside the Farm Business mentors to provide professional therapeutic support for farmers and farming families who are in crisis and this has significantly improved outcomes for those supported and their farm business.

At present Rural Support has approximately 35 volunteers who give their time, knowledge, expertise, and experience to the organisation. They undertake Support Line cover, work/life balance guidance, promotion, and outreach as and when required.

Rural Support continually evaluates its Support Line hours to meet demand. The existing volunteer levels are adequate and this is reviewed on a regular basis throughout the year.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

Rural Support's Vision is of a vibrant, healthy, and resilient farming community in Northern Ireland. Its mission is to provide professional and practical support to farmers, farm families and farm businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

It aims to do this through:

- improving the health and wellbeing of farmers and farm family members;
- helping build resilient farm businesses that are adaptable to ongoing change and challenges;
- promoting socially inclusive services that the farming community can deliver for people in need of additional support; and,
- being a strong advocate and champion for the farming community by contributing to a robust evidence base which helps inform future policy decisions.

In pursuing the organisation's objectives, Rural Support follow the strategic aims as outlined below which have been developed as part of the 2021-2024 strategy:

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Strategic Aim 1	We connect with all farming families <i>in need</i> and provide up to date and readily available assistance and resources relating to health and wellbeing; farm business; and personal and future planning for <i>all farming</i> families and farm family members through our service programmes, networks and the online hub.
Strategic Aim 2	With Social Farming at its core, Rural Support has a relevant and impactful <i>social innovation</i> function, providing tangible and practical solutions through a range of projects and services in support of those most vulnerable in our rural communities particularly older people and those who experience loneliness and isolation and/or are socially and/or economically-disadvantaged.
Strategic Aim 3	We develop and grow our <i>expert team</i> of staff, volunteers, and mentors, who lead from the front using person-centred coaching and mentoring, to provide support to farmers and all members of our farming families; during times of crisis; in planning for successful farm businesses; and, in developing strong mental and physical resilience, for now and the future.
Strategic Aim 4	We have in place a <i>networking strategy</i> , to both develop existing and create new collaborations, with those in the public and private sectors so we can work together to provide meaningful and pragmatic support for farming families and their businesses, and rural communities.
Strategic Aim 5	We focus on helping farmers and farming families to <i>build resilience and personal confidence</i> in engaging with other agencies who could assist them in building more successful businesses – essentially helping to bridge the gap that currently exists between the services that are available and the take-up of services by those who could benefit but are reluctant to participate.
Strategic Aim 6	We create a <i>professional and agile</i> business operation which will incorporate a well-structured and motivated management team, staff, mentors, and volunteers underpinned by appropriate HR development and management process.
Strategic Aim 7	We implement <i>appropriate systems to produce timely financial information</i> and ensure professional financial, governance and internal controls which will be reviewed independently on an annual basis. We will also implement appropriate information and data management systems to support our work with communities, partners, and funders.

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PUBLIC BENEFIT STATEMENT

The Trustees of Rural Support confirm that they have complied with their duty under section 4(6) of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 to have regard to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit and that the public benefit requirement has informed the activities of the charity in the year ended 31 March 2024.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE 2023/2024

Rural Support is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It operates across Northern Ireland from a base in Cookstown, Co Tyrone Northern Ireland. It has a small staff team of 18 and is managed by a voluntary Board of representatives with agricultural and rural interests.

The organisation's main areas of charitable activity and services include:

- Provision of a Support Line service for rural dwellers between 09.00am and 09.00pm, Mon-Fri;
- Provision of contact information and/or connecting callers to appropriate support;
- Provision of business, finance, technical and counselling mentoring and ongoing support;
- Provision of training programmes to develop resilience and knowledge for those working in the agri-sector;
- Provision of the Social Farming Support Service for Northern Ireland and various social innovation projects and activities to support the most vulnerable members of the rural community.

Undoubtedly, times are very challenging in the agri-food sector, with worries about rising input costs and concerns of food security impacting significantly on the farmer and the farming family. In April 2021, to increase the organisation's ability to respond to these concerns and other market pressures on the sector, Rural Support launched an ambitious new strategy 'Revisioning Rural Support for a Stronger Future – 2021 to 2024' which provides capacity for wider ranging, more holistic support to farmers across the age spectrum – directly engaging with farmers and farm businesses before they reach crisis stage.

Now in the 3rd year of this new approach Rural Support has moved from a reactive position of support provision to providing a suite of proactive programmes and services dedicated to improving the health of both farm business and members of the farm family.

The focus is on empowering farmers and farm families to plan ahead for their business and personal health and wellbeing; become more resilient in times of difficulty; and know how to get the most appropriate support and from where.

While farmers, families and rural communities face ongoing and often unpredictable challenges, Rural Support remains steadfast in its commitment to serving those who need support and assistance.

At the end of the 3rd year of its current strategy, Rural Support's team has surpassed the ambitious KPIs set by the board and are in a strong position to fulfil the strategy's objectives.

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HOW HAVE WE MADE A DIFFERENCE?

During the 2023/24 financial year a number of key outcomes have been achieved by the Charity supporting our farmers and farming families to build resilience.

- Support Line calls and 98 referrals from the wider Agri-sector.
- 136 individuals received 1-1 support through the Public Health Agency mentoring programme – several of these cases required input from more than 1 mentor, complex cases to include finance, succession, TB closure, family disputes etc.
- Through the Farm Business Sustainability Programme delivered through CAFRE's Farm Family Key Skills programme some 37 families each received up to 20 hours of 1-1 mentoring support, completed 5 farm business focused workshops and enjoyed Workshop 6 where they could choose to attend several workshops on the one day to include – Managing Farm Finances, Carbon on Your Farm, Renewable Energy, Sustainable Farming, Diversification, Multispecies Swards and Succession Planning. The day concluded with a panel discussion to include David Brown (UFU President), Paul McHenry (CAFRE), Barry Caslin (Teagasc) and Graham Cooke (Rural Support Mentor).
- Thanks to support from the NFU Mutual Charitable Trust, 112 farmers completed workshops on various subjects to include Succession Planning and Preparing For Farm Inspections.
- CAFRE Coping with The Pressures of Farming – 216 individuals across 15 locations received this training which was the 3rd year of the programme which has now finished.
- CAFRE Making Tax Digital at the start of the year 290 farmers.
- Boots on The Ground mental health awareness training for the agri-industry – 223 Agri sector workers (Ulster Bank, DAERA Vets, NIFCC, Chestnutt Animal Feeds, Fane Valley, UFU).
- Royal Countryside Fund Resilience Programme – 34 families in two locations – Seskinore and Dungiven with successful Study Tour to Scotland under guidance of David Keiley from Kite Consulting.
- Life Beyond bereavement and loss support services – support provided to 48 individuals and over 500 people either attended the Celebration event in The Glenavon or watched online to remember our loved ones.
- Reviving Rural – counselling and therapy support services provided support to 50 clients.

SOCIAL FARMING: AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

Social Farming is an innovative use of agriculture to promote therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas. There are multiple benefits from Social Farming for both the individuals involved and the rural economy. Rural Support delivers the Social Farming Support Service for Northern Ireland, supporting farmers delivering Social Farming and promoting the service for those who could benefit from participation, leading its development here. Key achievements:

Delivery support

- Ongoing support to 14 farms delivering.
- New delivery established on 1 farm: Jigsaw.

Social Farming Standards

- 7 farms awarded Standards badge.

Promotion

- Social Farming stand in Horticulture Pavilion at Balmoral Show, May 2023.
- Social Farming Awareness Week, October 2022.
- Social Farming in NI: Future Focus Conference.

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Training

- Keeping Children and Adults Safe and Emergency First Aid at work training arranged by Rural Support, both in March 2024.
- Induction training delivered by Rural Support, March 2024.

SUPPORTING OLDER AND ISOLATED FARMERS AND FARMING FAMILY MEMBERS

In 2023/24 Rural Support continued its support programmes for older and isolated farmers and farming family members.

Across the Hedgerow – a telephone befriending service for older or vulnerable, and/or isolated people from the farming community which matches them with a person from the agri-community to provide connection and support. During this year 16 clients receiving calls from 13 volunteers.

Plough On - for older and isolated farmers aged 65, aims to tackle rural isolation and increase social opportunities for older farmers. The Plough On project provides a tangible and practical way to support those older farmers and bring them together with like-minded people, helping them to develop new networks and knowledge. The focus is on improving health and wellbeing through social inclusion, encouraging individuals to get and stay well both physically and emotionally – it also provides respite to farming families, sharing the load in supporting our older farming community. During this year support has been provided for ongoing Cohort 1 delivery to 7 groups and included a visit to Stormont to mark Ag Mental Health Week.

SHINING A LIGHT ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Part of the Rural Support's strategic approach is to embed new thinking in how farmers and farming families view the importance of physical and mental well-being and to remove any remaining stigma around the development and management of overall health.

The organisation focuses on communicating positive health messaging and providing practical ways to help improve health – both physical and mental - and incorporates this into all its programmes as an integral part of developing, growing, and sustaining a successful farm business.

Collaborative work is an essential element of destigmatising issues around mental and indeed physical health, given that these are interlinked with each other.

The Reviving Rural project (April 2022 – March 2024) continued in-year and includes campaigns and toolkit development to encourage self-help and development of positive behaviours around choices relating to mental and emotional health. Key achievements:

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Delivery of four digital campaigns:

- Work Life Balance for Young People;
- Eating Well for Women and Young People;
- Tackling Loneliness and Isolation for Women;
- Importance of Sleep for Young People

Learning & Development Support: Production of 4 resource videos:

- Dealing with stress
- Dealing with unhelpful thoughts
- Emotional wellness in agriculture
- Women in agriculture

The Northern Ireland Rural Health Forum, coordinated by Rural Support, brings together key decision makers in agriculture, public, voluntary, government and related commercial organisations to help influence public opinion and ensure the appropriate incorporation of mental and physical health needs in rural communities - particularly for farming families - into strategy and policy development.

As well as Rural Support, members of the Forum Steering Group include UFU; NFU Mutual; United Feeds; Chestnutt Animal Feeds Ltd; Moy Park; Ulster Bank; Danske Bank; YFCU; HSENI; Northern Health and Social Care Trust; Farm Family Health Checks Programme; Rural GPs; VetNI; ABP Food Group; Healthy Living Centre Alliance; PHA; and Mindwise

Key achievements:

NI Agri-Rural Health Forum: Steering group meetings during 2023/24 – focus on Forum messaging and engagement; events held:

- Webinar for health professionals 'What are the barriers and solutions in providing health and social care to farming families?'
- In-person events for farmers 'You and Your Farm Business Thriving Together'

KEY PARTNERSHIPS AND OUTREACH

Rural Support's strategy focuses on building relationships with the farming community from young people right through to older farmers and encompasses the whole farm family. It also focuses on increasing collaboration with key stakeholders to help deliver our objectives and on helping those stakeholders better reach the farming community in order to deliver theirs. In 2023/24 the charity continued to focus on working with agri-stakeholders as well as more widely with the public and private sector. Due to this increased engagement with the agri sector we have seen a significant increase in clients being referred through third parties. This reflects the work being done on the ground through outreach and other support programmes and our relationship with farmer-facing employees of companies working with our client base through our Boots on the Ground training. Securing referrals through this pathway helps reach farmers and farming families who would not ordinarily contact a Support or Helpline directly.

Overall, Rural Support has reached over 24,000 beneficiaries through its programmes and services during the year and reached countless others through its outreach, communications, and marketing activities. We engaged with approximately 1037 individuals through our outreach and information sessions. And in addition to this there were over 15,000 visits to the NI Farm Support Hub resource platform which launched in September.

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Rural Support featured in 260 newspaper articles this year and in 11 BBC radio interviews. It also held a special event on International Women's Day event at Chestnutt's Farm on the North Coast which gathered together women in agriculture.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

On reflection of the hard work and commitment of staff, volunteers, and board members over the last year, and despite the challenges presented thanks to an ever-changing external environment, Rural Support provides a unique and value for money service that is vital for rural communities and delivers for its community and funders. Reaching individuals in isolated rural areas who need support is by no means straightforward. However, Rural Support has proven that through its innovative approach and its outreach and volunteer programmes, support can be channelled to those in need at time of need.

Like most charities the main challenge we face is securing sufficient funding to meet demand and keep the ability to respond to those in need without delay or waiting lists. Going into 2024/25 Rural Support will continue to professionalise its fundraising efforts and secure the additional funding needed to create long-term sustainability for the organisation. Negotiations are ongoing with DAERA to establish a three-year funding platform.

Financial review

For the year ended 31 March 2024 Rural Support has received £903,819 of income throughout the year and had total expenditure of £937,328 resulting in a net deficit of £33,509. At 31 March 2024 Rural Support had total reserves of £228,868 of which £230,490 are unrestricted reserves and a net deficit of £1,622 of restricted reserves.

Funding Sources:

The organisation currently receives support from the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Public Health Agency and donations from National Farmers Union (NFU) Mutual Charitable Trust. It also carries out fundraising activities to generate other income and currently has a number of donations and funding from other sources including National Lottery Community Fund; the Department of Health Mental Health Fund through the Community Fund for Northern Ireland and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI). It also receives donations from the general public.

Reserves Policy

Rural Support aims to have sufficient funds equal to the value of six months of core costs. Currently the organisation has reserved more than six months. An ambitious programme of fundraising was launched in 2022/23 and work continues to roll out in relation to this area with resources being dedicated to this effort – including creating a dedicated unit to manage it – to help ensure reserves are kept at an appropriate level and that core funding is underpinned by sufficient income to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness.

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Structure, governance and management

The Trustees, who are also the directors for the purpose of company law, and who served during the year and up to the date of signature of the financial statements were:

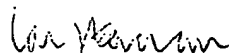
Mr Peter Boyle	
Ms Gemma Daly	(Resigned 29 October 2024)
Ms Jennifer Hawkes	(Resigned 29 October 2024)
Mr Derek Lough	
Mr Daniel McAtamney	(Resigned 29 October 2024)
Ms Claire Saunders	
Mr James Speers	(Resigned 19 September 2023)
Mr Ian Stevenson	
Mr Victor Chestnutt	
Ms Zita McNaughton	(Resigned 29 October 2024)
Mr Robin Irvine	
Mr Peter Alexander	(Appointed 19 September 2023)
Mr Gerry Doran	(Appointed 29 October 2024)
Ms Gill Gallagher	(Appointed 29 October 2024)
Ms Lauren Vance	(Appointed 29 October 2024)
Mr Damien Tumelty	(Appointed 29 October 2024)

Auditor

Disclosure of information to auditor

Each of the Trustees has confirmed that there is no information of which they are aware which is relevant to the audit, but of which the auditor is unaware. They have further confirmed that they have taken appropriate steps to identify such relevant information and to establish that the auditor is aware of such information.

The Trustees' report was approved by the Board of Trustees.



Mr Ian Stevenson

Trustee

Dated: 10/12/2024