

Rural Sector (RDC RCN and NIRWN) submission to the All-island Civic Dialogue on Brexit

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About RDC

RDC, the rural development organisation for Northern Ireland, works to support and encourage integrated rural development actions that recognise and value the contribution of agriculture, rural regeneration, the environment and culture in realising its vision of '*a living, working, sustainable and shared countryside*'.

RDC holds the EU Rural Development Programme Network Support Unit contract for Northern Ireland (and together with counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales make up the UK National Rural Network). The Northern Ireland Network Support Unit has a membership of over 2,000 individuals with interests across the 3 main programme priorities of Agri-Food and Farming; Agri-Environment and Forestry; and Rural Economic and Community Development. RDC has established cross border linkages through its role as the Network working closely with the Ireland National Rural Network, as a managing agent for the International Fund for Ireland and a member of the Early Years All Ireland Implementation Group.

About RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional, membership based, voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 280 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

About NIRWN

NIRWN is a membership based organisation established in 2006. NIRWN work to advance rural women's equality and participation in society by amplifying and articulating the voices of rural women at local, regional and strategic level. NIRWN's aim as the only regional rural support organisation dedicated to rural women; is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We work to ensure rural women are recognised and supported to

fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society. NIRWN adheres to the application of community development principles in practice which enables people to: follow a useful and structured process of working together to identify their needs; take action to exert influence on the decisions which affect their lives; and improve their quality of life and ultimately the quality of wider community life.

Mission

‘To amplify and articulate the voice of rural women at local, regional and strategic level’

Objectives

- To increase the voice of rural women at a policy level
- To advocate and lobby on behalf of rural women
- To provide information and networking opportunities for rural women
- To represent rural women on the Women’s Regional Consortium
- To pilot innovative projects to further the vision of rural women
- To hold statutory bodies to account to measure their impact on rural women

As rural development organisations, we welcome the opportunity to engage in the All-island Civic Dialogue Forum on Brexit to ensure that issues concerning the wider rural economy and the community sector are represented.

THE VALUE OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) is supported through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which is the single largest common policy across the European Union. The CAP framework sets out a range of farming, environmental and rural development activities as well as controlling EU agricultural markets.

The CAP is based on a two-pillar structure – Pillar 1 and Pillar 2.

- Pillar 1 supports both direct payments to farmers and market management measures.
- Pillar 2 focuses on improving the structural and environmental performance of agriculture and on promoting local/rural development.

Rural Development is supported through Pillar 2. The European Union has three objectives for the development of our rural areas:

- **Objective 1** - Improving the competitiveness of the agriculture, forest and food industries;
- **Objective 2** - The sustainable management of the region’s natural resources
- **Objective 3** - The development of rural areas.

The current Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme is worth in the region of **£623m** between 2014-2020.

THE CHALLENGE OF BREXIT

- Rural development is broad and multi-faceted, it covers a wide range of areas and interests but by and large it is about people and place. It is about ensuring that people can continue to live and work in the communities in which they were born, it's about ensuring these communities are vibrant, sustainable and have adequate access to services and jobs locally.
- Rural Development Policy in Northern Ireland to date has largely been directed, influenced and supported because of the EU Rural Development Programme. The Brexit vote therefore introduces uncertainty around the continuity of Rural Development and long-term funding support for the broader rural economy.
- We are entering unprecedented times and we need to collectively ensure that rural development, in its broadest sense, as a tool for economic and social development does not get lost or pushed further down the agenda.
- There are many excellent examples of Rural Development Projects in Northern Ireland and Ireland, many of these have advanced through the application of the LEADER approach which is a vital component of the Rural Development Programme. LEADER is a tried and tested model, it operates on the principles of bottom up development and the basis that local people are best placed to identify local solutions to local problems. The potential loss of this unique approach is a real risk to the future development of rural communities.
- If small farmers are forced out of the industry due to a reduction in the levels of agricultural subsidy the absence or dilution of a Rural Development Programme will be a further disadvantage and will make their transition, in terms of farm diversifications, small business creation or seeking alternative off-farm employment more difficult.

The current and previous LEADER programmes in Northern Ireland have been worth £170 million¹ in funding to the rural economy, matched by project promoter contributions the real value is likely to be more than £250 million. The LEADER programme, which is delivered by the Local Action Groups, is the element of RDP through which community groups access funding. The current programme is worth £70m in Northern Ireland. It funds projects under the following measures

- basic services
- village renewal
- rural business investment
- broadband and

¹ £100m during 2006-2013 Programme Period and £70m in the 2014-2020 period.

- co-operation.

This funding is very important to people in rural areas supporting community/voluntary groups to develop their community buildings and services that operate from them, in supporting farm diversification and in helping rural businesses expand and develop. This has been a critical investment that has made a significant contribution to the development of rural communities.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

In the event of Brexit

- What is Northern Ireland's approach to rural development policy in the future?
- How do we develop a dedicated rural development policy that meets the needs of rural citizens in NI?
- Agriculture and rural development are devolved issues so will Northern Ireland have the freedom to tailor our Rural Development Policy to our needs or will we need to conform to a UK Rural Development framework (if the UK government decides to formulate such a framework)?
- What type of legislative programme (if any) is required to bring forward a new rural development policy and how will government do that in a way that has the input of stakeholders and communities?
- What will any actions that accompany a new rural development policy look like?
- How much will those actions cost and how will NI pay for them? If the NI Executive decides to deviate significantly from what's decided at Westminster will the Executive need to meet any additional cost from within the block grant?

THE BORDER

RCN & RDC welcome the commitment from both the British and Irish governments to work towards mechanisms to keep an open border between both parts of the island. This is crucial for the continued development of communities, particularly rural communities, on both sides of the Border, to facilitate trade and to underpin the progress made by the peace process. The agri-food sector is particularly vulnerable to disruption with significant cross border flows of produce in both directions. Brexit also has the potential to disrupt public sector cross border co-operation and both governments as well as statutory agencies should commit to continued cross border co-operation at local service delivery level where it makes sense to do so.

HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTIONS

As three agencies engaged on social justice issues we are concerned that the hard-won human rights enshrined in EU policy are protected in a new structure. It is imperative that the EU protection afforded to the citizens of NI, particularly those most vulnerable continue unbroken and unchanged as BREXIT unfolds. In the absence of an EU policy driver we would

recommend the urgent development of a Bill of Rights for NI as set out in the Good Friday Agreement

OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM BREXIT

We need to consider the potential opportunities that exist

- Potential to develop a strong Rural Development Policy, more targeted to local rural circumstance
- Potential for greater flexibility in funding and development of new region specific Rural Development Schemes that will support the NI Executive Programme for Government objective of securing balanced economic growth across the region.
- Opportunity to retain LEADER principles ensuring the bottom up approach is maintained