



European Rural Parliament 2015
National report from Northern Ireland
prepared by
Rural Community Network

Introduction

Rural Community Network accepted the invitation to act as national champion for the European Rural Parliament 2015. We set ourselves to collect ideas from rural communities, and to present these in a report to the ERP.

This report describes :

- a. The campaign i.e. how the ideas were collected and synthesised, including a note on the number of people who have been involved
- b. The concerns expressed by rural people, and their aspirations for the future of their communities
- c. The achievements of rural communities, or of the public and non-government organisations which serve those communities, with brief case-study examples:
- d. The demands which rural people wish to make to their local, regional, national or multi-national authorities, including where relevant the European Union

The campaign

Rural Community Network undertook to host a series of 6 workshops to facilitate engagement with rural dwellers in each of Northern Ireland's 6 counties. This approach was designed to reach far and wide across Northern Ireland in the spirit of the European Rural Parliament's 'upward cascade of ideas'. Each workshop event was structured to give an overview of the 2015 European Rural Parliament, how the 'upward cascade of ideas' was being gathered in various regions, the outcomes from the previous European Rural Parliament and an idea of what we were hoping to gain from the local workshop events by way of input from participants.

Workshop Structure. We hosted a 2 and a half hour workshop which aimed to be grounded in people's lives and their experiences of rural life, be that working in a rural area, living in a rural area or both. We used a short presentation to explain to participants the purpose of the workshop and how views and opinions put forward would be fed into the European Rural Parliament process.

To get the workshop underway, participants were asked to share a story about a positive memory they had about growing up in or living in a rural community. Then we asked the participants to split into groups and to depict a vision of an 'ideal rural community' on paper – either in writing, drawing or both. This vision was shared between all the people who attended the workshops.

Groups were then asked to explore the reality of rural life in Northern Ireland in 2015. We asked participants to discuss and note a list of their concerns for the future of rural communities and to

“It’s a chicken and egg situation, we’re told by Invest NI that foreign companies won’t invest West of the Bann because of poor infrastructure so unless the state invests in infrastructure that will continue to be the case.” (Participant, ERP Workshop 2015)

Needs of older people. Concern was expressed at all the workshops regarding a growing ageing population in rural areas and the implications that this has for health and social care services in rural areas as well as the social isolation of rural older people and fears over safety and security.

Broadband. Participants stated that Investment in Broadband and mobile communications provision in rural areas, especially those rural areas which are more remote is critical in many ways but especially for economic development. Effective high speed broadband and mobile telephony will enable indigenous rural businesses to trade more effectively, to explore potential for exports, to advertise and market their products and services and to facilitate financial transactions. As well as its critical importance to economic development, improved Broadband is needed for individual households and citizens to access information, educational opportunities and, increasingly, to access government services. Whilst significant investment has been made by government in rural broadband in Northern Ireland, it could be argued that this has amounted to “running to stand still” as the speed of broadband provision in cities and towns had surged ahead.

Small enterprises. Participants stated that government needs to commit to improving support for rural micro and small business. In rural Northern Ireland, these businesses, along with farming are essential to sustaining the rural economy. We are concerned that Invest NI¹ does not take seriously the needs of smaller businesses that can create jobs in rural areas. We also believe that further investment in farm diversification is required, as agriculture continues to be pressured by low incomes and poor returns for primary producers.

Farming. Farming is less viable than it was twenty years ago and the problems associated with agriculture in Northern Ireland continue to deepen. Farm incomes are very low and the vast majority of farm businesses can only be sustained through CAP subsidy and off-farm employment/income. This will be a growing issue in the future as farmers age and fewer young people enter the business. There is a real fear of land abandonment in the more marginal areas, with unknown consequences for the rural environment.

Rural tourism. Participants called for a re-examination of support for rural tourism in Northern Ireland. Rural citizens are concerned that the NI Tourist Board is too heavily focussed on a small number of ‘signature’ attractions and themes to attract international tourists:

“NI Tourist Board is obsessed with the Giant’s Causeway, the Titanic and golf tourism– they don’t appear to consider the unique historical, cultural and environmental assets in rural communities that tourists from other parts of Europe would really value” (Participant, ERP Workshop 2015)

As well as the economic benefits, it was considered important to attract tourists to rural areas as it can raise the confidence of citizens and make people more aware of the assets that exist in rural communities.

Services in rural areas. Serious concerns were expressed about the withdrawal of services from rural communities and the threat of further deterioration as public sector spending cuts filter down from the United Kingdom Government to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Coupled with the reduction in population in rural areas, these spending cuts have led to the increasing centralisation of public services such as health, education, post office services and public transport, plus the

¹ Invest NI is Northern Ireland's regional economic development agency, a non-departmental public body.

withdrawal of the private sector through the closure of banks, shops and pubs. If these trends are allowed to continue, they will lead to a vicious circle of population reduction unable to support vital services which in turn will lead to a further reduction in population.

“A bus pass to access free transport for the over 60’s isn’t much use to me if there is no bus service” (ERP 2015 workshop participant)

Community buildings. The continued vitality and effectiveness of the rural community development infrastructure in Northern Ireland is a further serious concern highlighted in the workshops. Since the 1980s, a network of community and village halls have been developed throughout the region. These community buildings, and the groups who sustain them, provide important community meeting spaces and offer a wide range of services to rural communities across the region. In many areas these organisations, as well as providing meeting space and services, are the hub of their community and offer support to vulnerable rural dwellers.

Rural organisations. The importance of community development in rural communities has been recognised by government, but as austerity continues to bite groups are concerned that vital services will be lost in rural areas:

“Strong rural organisations need to be supported and sustained, they provide vital services for young people, the elderly and community relations. They provide a voice for rural areas. But in recent times the big groups have gained strength and resources while smaller local groups have been allowed to fade due to lack of resources and lack of investment. It’s not easy to provide services with no income.” (ERP 2015 workshop participant)

“The level of bureaucracy required for small rural voluntary groups, stops many people from becoming involved. The new Charity registration process is very daunting and off putting” (ERP 2015 workshop participant)

Sectarianism and racism. The importance of continuing to address the legacy of sectarianism and racism in rural communities which was exacerbated during the 30 years of The Troubles continues to concern rural groups. Whilst Northern Ireland has moved on in many respects, some level of sectarianism and segregation between the two main communities in rural NI, though less obvious than in towns and cities, still exists². This has led to parallel provision of services in many rural communities and to a divided education system where children from different faiths are largely educated separately. The rise of racism in rural communities was also recognised as a concern that needs to be kept on the agenda. As migrant workers from across the EU have arrived to work, and make their home in NI, racism has increased. As the free movement of people across the EU is a fundamental principle, we need to continue to guard against racism.

Cross-border development. The issue of cross-border development between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was also identified as an area of concern. Outside of the corridor between Belfast and Dublin, much of the border area remains undeveloped with higher rates of income inequality, unemployment and poor access to services. At several of the workshops, the need for better cross-border development and co-ordinated planning of public services between the two jurisdictions was highlighted as a major concern. There are very few concrete examples of the

² Beyond Belfast; Contested Spaces in Urban, Rural and Cross Border Settings by Bell J. Et. al. Published by NI Community Relations Council and Rural Community Network (report)2010 available at http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/DatabaseDocs/doc_3480212.pdf

governments of the two jurisdictions taking this issue seriously and following the example of good practice from other Border regions across Europe.

Aspirations

Participants in the workshop the following aspirations for the future of rural edge in Northern Ireland :

- That young people are given the chance to remain in rural communities by having access to well-paid employment opportunities, enabling them to contribute to rural communities as citizens and leaders.
- That high speed broadband is made available to all homes and businesses in rural areas to transform service delivery, tourism, small business creation and development.
- That a spirit of innovation and resilience will continue to develop within rural communities to enable us to adapt to the challenges of the future.
- That the EU Rural Development Programme will continue into the future, responding to the changing needs of rural areas and delivered in partnership with rural citizens using the LEADER approach.
- That rural citizens continue to develop their appreciation and understanding of the environment and develop their communities in a sustainable way to safeguard their areas for future generations.

Achievements and case studies

We offer a description of the achievements of rural communities, or of the public and non-government organisations which serve those communities, with brief case study examples:

Rural community development. Since the early 1980s, a movement of rural community development groups has become established across rural Northern Ireland. The LEADER 1 project sought to develop 6 rural signature projects. Greater opportunities for investment in rural communities on social, economic and cultural issues arose with the implementation of LEADER 2, along with EU investment in the form of the Special EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the retention by Northern Ireland of its Objective One (transition) status. The implementation of both LEADER and the Peace programmes relied heavily on locally-led community action and thus encouraged the growth of many small rural community associations.

Community infrastructure. Investment in village infrastructure through the CRISP scheme³ and the implementation of the Area Based Strategy Approach to tackling some of the most disadvantaged rural wards in NI ensured that rural groups in some of the most remote and disadvantaged areas had access to additional support and investment. During this time, many community groups availed of the funding opportunities to develop community facilities which sought to act as service and social hubs for community activity. Investment in community halls, business units, meeting rooms, and play park facilities supported people to come together to drive positive change in their communities. In many areas, these facilities are the glue that hold many communities together as they are highly valued resources which also require significant voluntary effort to sustain.

³ Community Regeneration and Improvement Special Package (CRISP) regenerated run-down town and village centres with a package of developments in each town or village that included a core economic project developed by a local community group.

Rural support networks. During the 1990s, the Rural Community Network sought to develop an infrastructure for the community groups described above, in order to support them in capacity building, animation and to address areas of weak community infrastructure. The establishment of a Rural Support Network infrastructure of 11 (now 9) networks, created right across Rural Northern Ireland, appears to be unique to this region (see case study 1).

These Rural Support Networks established across NI often act as community partners through which regional programmes, devised jointly with statutory agencies, can be delivered.

Case Study 1. Rural Support Network Infrastructure

9 Rural Support Networks (RSNs) are recognised as key grass-roots, community membership-based and managed organisations working across Northern Ireland to drive forward community initiatives, using a community development approach that engages and represents effectively across the sector. RSNs deliver a Rural Community Development Support Service comprising Community Development and Social Enterprise support to over 1350 community groups. This service is funded through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The RSNs target rural communities by determining and responding to the key issues impacting on the lives of rural people, and by rolling out programmes on anti-poverty and social inclusion.

The RSNs have brought forward a programme of activities through direct engagement with rural communities and LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) : these activities support the LAGs in achieving the objectives for their area.

RSNs have enabled community and voluntary groups to draw down support from the Rural Development Programme with interventions such as promoting RDP information, helping groups new to the RDP to apply, helping unsuccessful groups to reapply, facilitating good practice visits, holding funding workshops, ensuring community participation in village renewal action plans and supporting groups to implement actions identified in these action plans. The Rural Support Networks are also supporting groups with governance and procurement assistance. A significant number of Network Board Members and staff sit as social partners on the Local Action Groups, ensuring the funding is targeted at community need. They also meet regularly with other agencies to ensure local programmes are complementary and benefits are maximised for rural areas.

[http:// localruralsupportnetworks.org/](http://localruralsupportnetworks.org/)

Community education. Alongside the development of networks, the Rural Community Network and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development promoted community education programmes for community development practice. These programmes aim to encourage a theoretical understanding of rural development amongst community groups, statutory agencies and Government bodies.

Effect upon government programmes. The success of this programme of education, training and networking included not only the development of articulate community leaders but the development of strong rural advocates (Rural Champions) within government and statutory service providers. Health officials started to look at how health service delivery could be reconfigured to take account of rural circumstance and began investment in programmes of intervention specifically tailored towards wider rural issues of isolation, suicide and mental ill health. The NI Housing Executive began to seek ways to identify hidden social housing need in rural areas. Rural poverty and disadvantage began to be addressed by those developing policies for childcare, return to work schemes and outreach education and training provision. Many of these intervention programmes relied heavily on access to local community groups and their facilities for the successful implementation of these programmes.

Case study 2. Carntogher Community Association

Carntogher Community Association (CCA) was formed in 1992 and is located in the Sperrin Mountains near Maghera in Co Derry. It is a dispersed, isolated settlement of about 200 homes. CCA aimed to strengthen the local community, prevent further depopulation, and develop ways to create economic, environmental and cultural sustainability and to enhance the fabric and character of the community. The restoration of the Irish language within the area was central to the ethos of the Community Association. Today Carntogher has a fast growing, young and vibrant Irish-speaking community with a clear vision for re-asserting the Carntogher area as a modern 21st century Gaeltacht (Irish speaking Area)

The beginning of the journey for the group in 1992 was a successful lobby to the Department of Education to invest in a new school facility and to secure the old school as a temporary meeting space for the local community. In 1996 the group successfully applied to develop a mixed tenure housing scheme of 8 affordable homes for the area. The need for these homes was established through successful collaboration with a Rural Champion for the NI Housing Executive who understood that the development of these homes would be key to sustaining the local population and enabling the survival of the school facility in years to come.

In the period from 1998 to 2000, Carntogher secured funding from LEADER and the Lottery Funded Millennium Halls Programme to develop a community enterprise facility with business starter units. They now have a community hall, a computer-training suite, have retained a post office facility for their area and have developed a shop specialising in Irish and local crafts.

The ambition to support the preservation of the Gaelic language has been achieved by establishing the first rural Irish-language pre-school playgroup and the subsequent development of an Irish language primary school, which was again the first of its kind in a rural area of N. Ireland.

In 2000 the group sought to develop a series of environmental protection projects which included the preservation of a local ancient woodland and the negotiation of its purchase with local landowners. They have since established a successful biodiversity/ environmental project educating the public in environmental preservation and enhancement.

The Carntogher group believes that they have a particularly innovative approach to rural development which adopts a broad-based regeneration strategy within a geographically specific area that could form the blue print for regeneration in other rural areas.

Web link: <http://www.ancarn.org/1/home/>

Cross-departmental support. More recently rural development investment in NI has sought to encourage cross-departmental support for rural investment and a greater understanding of the need to differentiate for rural service delivery and investment. The development of the Rural White Paper action plan and the writing in of rural-proofing as a concept for the Programme for Government have had limited impact. One area where a joined up approach to rural community development has begun to show positive impact is on Rathlin Island through the Rathlin Island policy.

Case study 3: Rathlin Island

Following a visit to Rathlin Island in 2006, Northern Ireland's Minister for Regional Development highlighted to the Northern Ireland Executive the difficulties faced by the islanders in having their issues addressed across government in a co-ordinated manner. In recognition of these difficulties and Rathlin's position as Northern Ireland's only offshore inhabited island, the Executive agreed that a specific Rathlin Island Policy should be developed to support the island community, to ensure the sustainability of island life and to promote a vibrant island community.

The policy is implemented and managed by the Department of Regional Development with support from other central government Departments and the local district Council. Policy implementation is underpinned by the Rathlin Island Action Plan (see link below), a flexible document which is reviewed annually in accordance with community priorities. The Minister for Regional Development also chairs an annual cross-Executive Forum on the island to review progress in respect of the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan. Rathlin Development and Community Association (RDCA) are key stakeholders in the implementation of the Policy and Action Plan and are represented on the Ministerial Forum. All actions identified in the Action Plan are listed subject to agreement with RDCA.

The impact of this policy on Government has been an increase in the co-ordination of development and investment on the island. Recent support from Government departments has enabled the development of social housing on the island for the first time in its history alongside a proposal to support mixed tenure affordable housing on the same site. This allowed the size of the development to increase by 33%. Collaboration between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Social Development have seen an investment in the ferry services running between the island and the mainland and the proposed development of a much needed new harbour for the island. Additionally a planned programme of investment in waste disposal, emergency and medical service support and tourism development have all been undertaken in a planned way with the local community.

The Rathlin action plan enables the island to be proactive in addressing the needs of its community whilst understanding the constraints and support that can be gleaned from government departments. Community group members say the action plan has been a very positive experience for them in that they have the opportunity to sit directly with decision makers and make a case for local investment and support.

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/revised_rathlin_island_action_plan_-_3_july_2013_2_.pdf

<http://www.rathlincommunity.org/>

Demands to public authorities

We summarize below the demands which – on the evidence of our national campaign – the rural people of Northern Ireland wish to make to their local, regional, national or multi-national authorities, including where relevant the European Union

DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

- EU institutions and democracy are remote and inaccessible to EU citizens. The EU needs to fundamentally re- think how the European Institutions can re-engage with rural citizens, especially in peripheral countries before goodwill is damaged further and solidarity between European nations is further undermined.
- Northern Ireland Government Departments need to consider how they can actively engage rural citizens in decision-making processes as many feel they are remote from both policy development and resource allocation decisions.

COMMUNICATING THE ERP 2015 MESSAGE

- The outcome of the European Rural Parliament 2015 process must be effectively disseminated to European Institutions and within Northern Ireland to local MLAs and MEPs

INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

- The EU must work with member states to support further investment in transport infrastructure in peripheral rural areas across Europe.
- The Northern Ireland Executive must invest to provide an effective road network to support rural connectivity and enable access for rural citizens to employment and services.

BROADBAND 50/50

- Provision for rural broadband needs to be made an EU wide priority and supported by EU investment. We believe that the EU should commit to working towards a strategy in partnership with the telecommunications industry and with rural community groups in order that broadband coverage becomes universal across Europe and that download speeds in rural areas cannot fall below 50% of the average speeds accessible in towns and cities of each member state.

PROMOTING RURAL TOURISM

- Northern Ireland Tourist Board must engage with and promote the diverse cultural, environmental, archaeological and heritage assets that exist in rural communities and which would provide unique visitor experiences.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should also seek to invest in our rural cultural, heritage and environment assets and maximise EU funding opportunities to do so.

THE RURAL PREMIUM AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION IN RURAL AREAS

- Governments must acknowledge the additional costs of service delivery in rural areas and must factor in these costs in policy development and service delivery plans.

ONGOING INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

- Investing in the capacity of rural communities, and the citizens who volunteer their time to work for their betterment, must represent an ongoing commitment to re-skilling and learning.

- Develop an EU wide ICT hub to facilitate the exchange of ideas for rural development projects/ideas. This should be easily searchable across a range of themes and showcase examples of good practice.

INVESTMENT IN NI'S COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

- The Northern Ireland Executive should continue to invest in the community infrastructure developed in the region over the past 30 years. Considerable resources and experience have been developed that make a huge contribution to the quality of life for rural citizens.
- Rural communities and organisations must take steps to develop the next generation of volunteers, this is working well in some organisations but less so in others.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

- The Northern Ireland Executive and the EU should invest further in the development of social enterprise in rural communities as a means of providing valuable services as well as providing a measure of sustainability for community organisations.

FINANCING FARM DIVERSIFICATION

- Routes to accessible finance must be made available to younger farmers and younger members of farm households to stimulate innovative and effective farm diversification businesses.

HEALTH

- Health services for rural citizens should be delivered as close to the patient as they can possibly be and should be configured flexibly to suit the needs of a wide range of patients.
- Develop support for those with mental health problems at local level.
- Ensure effective cross-border health provision is fully explored and exploited to retain health services in more peripheral counties such as Fermanagh/Tyrone/Donegal/Cavan/ Monaghan and Sligo.

HOUSING

- The Northern Ireland Executive should continue to support the provision of social and affordable housing in rural communities and should seek to proactively uncover hidden housing demand which may exist in rural areas.

RURAL PROOFING

- The Northern Ireland Executive must ensure effective rural proofing of all policy decisions and changes in service delivery to identify adverse impact on rural citizens and accompanying mitigating measures. We welcome the agreement of the Northern Ireland Executive this week on policy proposals for the introduction of a Rural Proofing Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly in September. All government Departments in Northern Ireland must recognise that the needs of rural areas and citizens are their responsibility rather than just the responsibility of DARD. Effective rural proofing must also ensure proper accountability over the transfer of powers and budgets from the Assembly to local government in the region.

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING HIDDEN RURAL DEPRIVATION

- Policy makers across the EU must recognise the hidden nature of rural deprivation and develop systems which will identify and evidence the nature and extent of rural deprivation as well as designing interventions which will address the issues that are uncovered as a result.

CROSS BORDER RURAL DEVELOPMENT

- Cross border collaboration for effective regional development must become a political priority. Cross border collaboration should not just be between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland but should link to both Scotland and Wales. All four jurisdictions have large rural populations and face similar challenges.

HOLDING NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS TO ACCOUNT TO EU AGREEMENTS & LEGISLATION

- The EU should continue to review with member states how they comply with EU legislation and directives and where member states fail to meet their obligations can be effectively encouraged to comply.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

- Make the Rural Development Programme easier to understand and simplify the regulations.

EDUCATION

- The Northern Ireland Executive needs to move decisively to promote and develop integrated schooling and integrated services to reduce duplication of funding and tackle the legacy of division of the troubles. This should be made a requirement of land use planning and public funding streams.
- The Executive should seek to ensure that primary-level education services are retained within rural communities as they are a key element of rural sustainability.

INNOVATION AND POSITIVITY

- All stakeholders should be encouraged to support innovation and entrepreneurship of rural communities as a key strength of most rural areas. We need to remain positive and promote the positive features of rural life to ensure that rural areas are seen as an asset to wider society.
- All rural citizens and policy makers need to take a much longer view – 20 years into the future to ensure we are planning to meet the challenges of the future rather than the challenges of the present.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Northern Ireland Executive needs to recognise that sectarianism and racism are present in rural communities and to work with local groups to address these issues