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# rural **NETWORK** news

RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORK (NI) MAGAZINE



## where is rural?

inside



*Resourcing the Voluntary and  
Community Sector*

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*"The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality".*

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The views of any particular contributor are not necessarily those of the Editorial Team or Rural Community Network

## **Quality Statement**

*"We are committed to continually improving the quality of our services to our members and the wider rural community and the standards of our work and organisational practices".*

# Introduction

**W**elcome to the Spring edition of Network News which focuses on two strategically important issues for the future of rural communities in Northern Ireland.

This edition aims to raise rural specific issues, concerns and voices in relation to the Task Force document – ‘Pathways for Change’.

Inside are contributions which set the rural context for the current consultation on the future resourcing of the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

Articles within question ‘Pathways for Change’ for failing to address the rural context. Rural community development practitioners ask what does social investment really mean, is it anything new or different, and, most importantly, what could it mean for rural communities?

This edition aims to progress discussion and debate and to encourage and inform rural responses to this important consultation. The deadline for responses is the 26th March.

It is important rural views are heard by the Task Force – please get your response in!



# RESOURCING THE Voluntary and Community Sector

**Rural communities will need to redress the imbalance evident in the publication from the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector 'Pathways for Change' by putting forward rural viewpoints by 26th March.**

At one level, the document may be seen as bland, at another it provides a framework for a way ahead. The new idea, social investment, may in fact not be new at all but wraps a number of best practice concepts together and gives it a name – Social Investment. Put simply the focus will be on outcomes, many of which will be long term, creates the best configuration through partnership to address the outcomes and could offer long term funding which should mitigate against the worst excesses of bureaucracy.

RCN also welcomes the acknowledgment of the difficulties that local community groups will have as a result of reduction in funding. We would certainly welcome the proposal for a Community Development Fund to support the activities of grassroots involvement in tackling poverty and disadvantage.

It is also refreshing to see the acknowledgement of the importance of campaigning and lobbying as part of what the sector contributes, working

from a relatively independent perspective. Although RCN was represented on the infrastructure working group, we would consider this to be one of the weaker areas of the document but one where the rural networks have much to say and much to contribute. There was an opportunity missed to highlight the unique networking infrastructure in rural areas and to demonstrate from our completed and ongoing mid-term reviews the qualitative work which is being done within this infrastructure, very much in line with the proposals in 'Pathways for Change'. The lack of a rural context, research and case studies is a mistake which should not be repeated in any follow up work to the document.

**Niall Fitzduff**  
**Director**  
**Rural Community Network**

# THE BIG MOMENT?

The Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland is at a crucial stage of its work. It has commissioned a number of pieces of research and it has established four working groups involving a wide cross section of people focusing on:

- Government policy for support and funding of the sector;
- Accountability and governance;
- Infrastructure; and
- Sustainability.

There has been a flurry of work, meetings and residential. The Task Force has produced its position paper 'Pathways for Change'. The paper is as short and straightforward as the Task Force could make it, although the issues are complex.

It is the Task Force's hope that the paper will open up debate and, coupled with an extensive consultation, further inform the Task Force itself on how it might develop its ideas for its final report to the Minister.

What some people refer to as the 'big idea' in the paper is the proposal for a Social Investment model for funding. This focuses on greater partnership between government and voluntary and community organisations with funding provided over a longer term and focused on the outcomes which the partners are trying to achieve. It's an attempt to get away from the obsession with process and accounting which dominates so much of the relationship between government and the sector. This idea needs to be explored further for its strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities it offers

and the threats. Focusing on outcomes means a strong emphasis on measurement and organisations being able to 'produce the goods'.

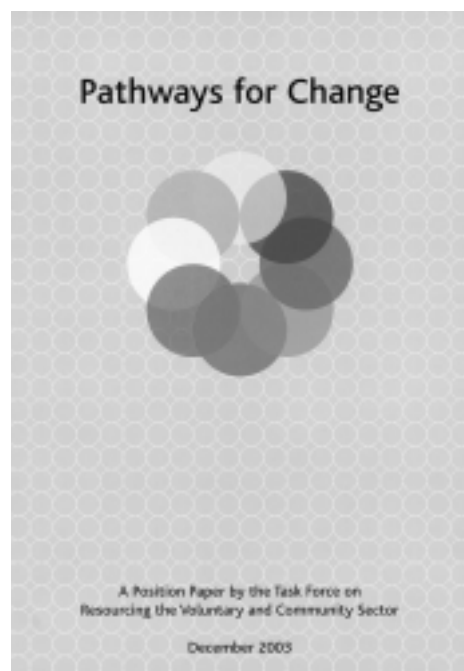
Significantly, the Task Force also believes that there is need for a programme to support local community development as Task Force members have considered that funding in this area is the most haphazard of all. The report is also strong on increased involvement of the sector in the delivery of public services but recognises that there is a need to support the voluntary and community sector's work in advocacy, policy and campaigning. There is support for helping organisations to take and manage risks as this is seen as one of the strong suits of the sector.

With regard to the voluntary and community sector infrastructure, the position paper suggests that there is a need to reduce overlaps and close gaps in the provision of the sector's infrastructure. Infrastructure provision should be more consistent and better performing.

It is essential that voluntary and community groups respond to the consultation which ends on 26 March 2004. The final report to the Minister could influence the sector's future for the next ten years. Don't miss your opportunity to influence that report.

A NICVA briefing paper on 'Pathways for Change' is available at [www.nicva.org](http://www.nicva.org) or contact Lisa McElherron, Public Affairs Manager at NICVA.

**Seamus McAleevey**  
Director, NICVA



# What's the Res Views from a Rural

A seminar was organised by Rural Community Network (RCN) on 4th February and was attended by RCN staff, Rural Support Network personnel and community development practitioners. This seminar was organised in order to discuss the main concerns on the 'Pathways for Change' document on the future resourcing of the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.

Participants welcomed the debate created and broad thrust of the Social Investment approach but had a number of important concerns about how it would be turned into action and practical strategies to support the sector in rural areas. A particular concern was the lack of any explicit reference to rural issues and priorities in the document. There was a desire to avoid special pleading for 'the rural' but the strategy did make reference to urban centred strategies such as *People and Place*, and in the context of Rural Proofing, the participants felt that greater acknowledgement of the distinctive challenges of community development in rural areas was required.

There was endorsement of the Social Investment approach, not least because participants felt that this was a model that they had practiced for some time across rural areas in Northern Ireland. The community and voluntary sector has always placed an emphasis on deliverable change in rural society but felt that some of the concepts and language around Social Investment needed to be clarified. For example, there was a concern that the sector will become excessively or even exclusively concerned with 'investment' against Government objectives rather than local community priorities. There is a danger that the best 'rate of return' for a programme or project might blunt the capacity of the sector

to lobby, challenge and campaign for rural rights and interests. In short, there was a feeling that the Task Force need to explain how investment would relate to the range of positive advocacy functions provided by the sector as set out at the start of the *Pathways* document.

Participants felt that key groups in the sector, such as the Rural Support Networks (RSNs), should think carefully about evolving dual roles under the Social Investment model by acting as a support body as well as a funding agency. There is a potential that the investment approach might place intermediary organisations in a difficult position by expecting them to build and deepen capacities at the same time as they are expected to deliver a return on funding against stated Government aims and objectives – *"it is difficult to be both referee and coach in the one match"*.

Linked to this was a concern about measuring and accounting for the 'outcomes' of investment. What indicators would be set, who would set them, how would data be collected and crucially how would information be used, were important questions raised in relation to the success of the whole Social Investment approach. In particular, it is important to construct measures that account for the 'social' content of the investment and the impact of funding on processes, capacities and ultimately the stock of social capital in rural society.

# ponse - Seminar

It was also highlighted that the rural sector has developed good fund management practices in the way in which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) relates to Rural Community Network (RCN) and RCN then on to the various Rural Support Networks. It is important that these relationships are reinforced not displaced by 'Pathways for Change' and to acknowledge that they could form a model for other areas of voluntary sector funding. It is also vital that any new funding environment changes the way in which financial accountability and audit systems work in practice. The sector must be free to innovate and take risks in tackling rural poverty and social exclusion without the excessive and disproportionate bureaucracy that has characterised some funding programmes in the past.

However, the seminar also raised an important debate about the need for change within the sector itself and in particular the need to rationalise delivery structures to achieve the best results for rural people. It was felt that 'partnership' had become an overused concept and that not all partners invested equally in local governance structures and

relationships.

It was acknowledged that fewer organisations might help to achieve more efficient social investment outcomes and that RCN, RSNs and local groups were open to a debate about the effects of public administration reform on delivery structures at a regional and local level.

**Michael Murray and Brendan Murtagh**  
Queen's University Belfast



What 's the Response -  
Views from a Rural Seminar

# RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT Change – What's The

The Task Force Position Paper – 'Pathways For Change' states that the NI voluntary and community sector employs an estimated 29,000 workers, accounting for 4.5% of the workforce, which is bigger than the agricultural, transport, financial or local government sectors. But despite the size of the sector, it is still an insecure and fragile one as far as the experiences of many rural workers are concerned. The experience of rural workers is also becoming an increasingly isolated one in a number of contexts.



There always have been concerns about the future of services, projects, organisations and jobs, and so far we don't seem to have learnt much from our previous experiences - history is still repeating itself, at least as far as 'resourcing' through EU Peace Programmes is concerned.

The nature and level of 'resourcing' in terms of funding has always been an issue. It is a common experience of many workers that they spend more time chasing funding for their own posts than on development work in the local area. The demoralising impact of this is well known. There is a widely held view that funding for posts needs to be of a longer-term tenure. This at least would help to foster a sense of security and permanency about posts.

However, job security is one thing, job satisfaction is another. The fact remains that many workers employed by community groups and small organisations are still isolated and unsupported. If we are to consider 'resourcing' the sector in its broadest sense then we need to look beyond just the money to the conditions and practices, which also prevail.

Support for and resourcing of community development work is not just about how much and where money comes from. What counts as much is respect and recognition, trust, commitment and willingness to participate. Let's not forget that a lot of very effective community development work has often taken place with very little resourcing!

Two of the most important words for me in 'Pathways for Change' are 'infrastructure' and 'relationships' because for me both are about giving and receiving support. No amount of actions or projects or programmes or strategies or plans can be implemented without a person or persons skilled, willing or committed to making things happen. Yet despite the numbers of workers in the sector and the amount of money that it has received, we still have isolated, unsupported workers on short-term contracts overwhelmed by workloads and bureaucracy.

'Pathways for Change' has set many alarm bells ringing and it is little wonder. For years workers in the sector have been saying 'if only they would just listen to us' but to no



# ENT and Pathways For Position?

avail. That is not the experience of the average worker toiling away in a small rural community. Many a rural worker is a mite cynical at the moment that their view will be overlooked. And the fact that there is no rural representation on the Task Force has not helped this perception.

What is needed is a strategy that supports the biggest resource we have; i.e. the 29,000 working within the sector, not to mention those working on a voluntary basis. Too many workers are transitory, moving in, on and out, often picking up a poor experience on the way. Too many volunteers and activists are overstretched and overburdened by conditions and legalities, increasingly accountable upwards but hardly ever outwards. The basic tenets of community development practice are overshadowed by the urgency of the next quarterly monitoring return.

Increasingly decent, well-paid posts are becoming harder and harder to fill. The re-advertisements in the Belfast Telegraph are testimony to this.

Yes, we need secure funding, of course we do. And we need a secure workforce too - paid workers and volunteers that have access to adequate support and training, who are treated with respect and trust. We also need a secure sector, based upon a well-resourced infrastructure that can provide the support that is needed, where it is needed, be it Newtownbutler or Newtownards.

It's not that I don't like change, I do.



Change is good, challenging and positive. But 'Pathways for Change' hasn't filled me with hope and enthusiasm. When I read the document, it makes me feel like I work within a sector that has got some kind of second class status, that is irresponsible and can't be trusted and must be controlled. It makes me feel that crossed 't's and dotted 'i's take precedence over people.

Then, maybe, if we are really good and tend to the paperwork priorities, we might be rewarded with a bit of calculated campaign work or reasonable risk taking.

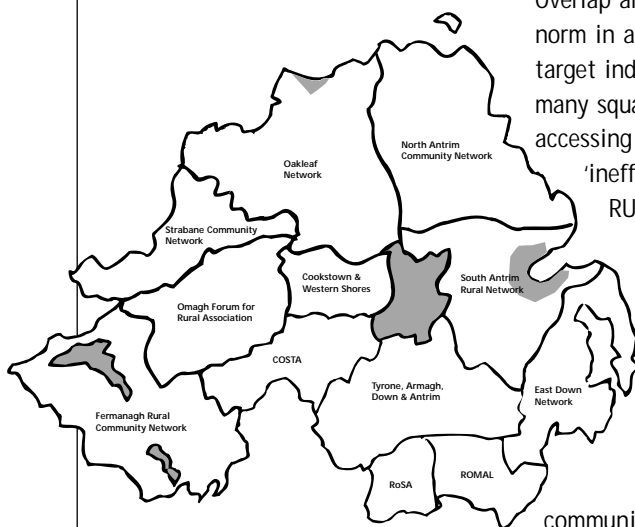
Isn't that where it all started?

**Anna Clarke**  
Rural Community Network



# RURAL LIFE IN THEIR HANDS!

It's a tough job and someone had to do it, but there appears to be a distinct gap in rural representation on the Task Force. This is probably one of the most important documents in several years and has far reaching implications for the whole voluntary and community infrastructure and still the word RURAL does not appear once in the text. In fairness URBAN is not much specified either, but the history, experiences and realities of life outside the population centres makes a different approach imperative.



Overlap and overcrowding is not the norm in areas where small numbers of target individuals are scattered across many square miles and delivering or accessing any service is nearly always 'inefficient' and costly. That is RURAL REALITY. But another reality is that an increasing rural population is putting increased strain on the local social, recreational and economic resources.

Thankfully there is a strengthening rural community support infrastructure and most Networks have managed to avoid the costly duplication of 'servicing a divided community' by the creation of parallel organisations.

The thrust of the document seems positive and holds out an alternative vision to one which predicts doom and gloom post 2006. There is no doubt that collaboration and active partnerships with the statutory sector are essential to the maintenance of the community support infrastructure.

The SOCIAL INVESTMENT approach is very worthy of closer examination and consideration and it is vital to encourage organisations to continually improve outcomes. However, to insist solely on measuring significant change in the lives of individuals may be counter-productive.

There is some level of community development support that MUST be maintained for the foreseeable future

to HOLD THE LINE in an ever-complicated world of consumerism and individualism.

People constantly strive to find contentment in the next SALE and must resort to bolting their door for fear that someone might knock. The definition of 'family' is becoming ever more flexible and uncertain. We can no longer rely solely on church and selflessness to protect the vulnerable.

Also, if government really wants to consult and improve participation in decision-making, there has to be a supported community sector. Currently one of the biggest challenges facing the sector is how to react positively to the myriad requests for community involvement in the wheels of public service delivery. The community and voluntary sector has to be joined-up and able to multi-task. Government needs to adapt its own house if fewer more effective partnerships are to become the norm.

Let's not "TARGET, MEASURE and BUREAUCRATISE" ourselves out of existence, but rather re-group, re-organise and realise why the community and voluntary sector has become a shining beacon for people who care about life.

Let us also remember the volunteers and community representatives in all of this and listen to what they require by way of support and then work with all our colleagues and partners to structure that support as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. But don't throw the babies out with the bath water.

**Nicholas McCrickard**  
East Down Rural Community Network

# Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector

## Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector

*A Local Government Perspective*

### **A traditional role for local authorities**

Local Authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland traditionally have had a strong role in working with the voluntary and community sector, with specific functions such as housing, personal social services and planning bringing Councils into close contact with their communities. Councils in Northern Ireland do not have these functions, yet despite this they have been successful in finding productive ways of working with the voluntary and community sector to support local economic, social and environmental development.

### **Taking a more strategic approach**

Until recently, the manner on which Councils in Northern Ireland have worked with the voluntary and community sector has been quite piecemeal. However, in 2000, the Department of Social Development recognised the need for a more strategic approach and requested that Councils consult with their communities and prepare draft Community Support Plans. These plans were produced in consultation with communities, based on an appropriate assessment of need and have now been refined over the last few years. The plans are due to be finalised in Spring 2004.

Although this has resulted in the development of a greater level of partnership and clarity of purpose, this work is not all plain sailing. The relationship between Councils and communities is complex and there is often confusion regarding roles and responsibilities, not helped by the myriad of sources of funding which lacks co-ordination. Community Support Plans have gone a long way in improving the situation, but this will be further developed through the work of the Department of Social Development Task Force. The document 'Pathways for Change' sets out a position of how these relationships can be developed to mutual advantage in the future. Councils recognise the need to develop their own roles, in partnership with the other stakeholders, to improve the lives of the people who live in their area.

### **Looking into the future**

Local Authorities in Scotland, England and Wales now have a Power of Well Being. This is an 'enabling power' of 'first resort', which allows them to spend public finances on anything in their areas to provide for social, economic and environmental well being. To achieve this, Councils must produce *Community Plans*, in which all the players; government, agencies,

business and community will have a role in creating a vision for their areas and a set of action based procedures which allows the main economic, social and environmental issues in their areas to be effectively tackled.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association recognises that there is a clear need for this power to be afforded to Councils in Northern Ireland. The creation of Community Plans will be a key mechanism which will permit the needs and priorities of areas to be identified and encourage joined up integrated responses to many of the greatest needs of our citizens.

**Heather Moorehead**  
**Northern Ireland Local Government Association**

# "if it is good to empower why, is it not

Not to welcome a document on *'Resourcing the Community and Voluntary Sector'* would be akin to a turkey failing to welcome the cancellation of Christmas! This document and debate is indeed welcome. The development of long term solutions to the sustainability of a healthy community and voluntary sector is one which should, without a doubt, involve all key stakeholders – government and sector alike. The position paper as presented, however, has limitations. This article will highlight some of the key issues from a rural women's network perspective.

As an initial overall comment, there is a striking shortcoming. That is, the document fails to acknowledge the different approach, context and structure of the community and voluntary sector in urban and rural areas. This document as it reads is clearly developed with a particular model and context in mind – and suffice to say, it's not rural!

The introduction and indeed the report as a whole over-emphasises the role of the sector in terms of 'social need', 'tackling deprivation' and 'service delivery' with the result that it minimises other critical areas of work – namely that of shaping social change and promoting active citizenship. It is within the

sector that much of the debate about how best to create and shape a better society takes place. This role is critical to creating a society which presents new opportunities, tackles structural inequalities, responds to social, economic and political changes and values and promotes the active participation of all citizens.

'Pathways for Change' refers to the 'acute problems' resulting from the transition from Peace I to Peace II. Some were more than acute – they were fatal. There were, for instance, consequences which were not just project specific, they were sectoral specific. For example, the transition has devastated the women's sector. The sector, relatively small and unresourced anyway, lost many workers because the new funding criteria no longer applied to the nature and purpose of the work within the sector. The irony here is that the nature of much of that work grew out of the initial funding available and if it is good to

# ...women in 1998 ...not in 2003?"

empower women in 1998, why is it not in 2003?

The outcomes are considerable. Firstly, the work, which made a huge contribution to the lives, not just of women but also of communities as a whole, has been whittled back to such an extent that it is struggling to survive. Secondly, the financial investment in the women's sector under Peace I has been wholly undermined by the failure to sustain it under Peace II.

Thirdly, the move is in direct conflict with the intention of the equality legislation which was also intended to underpin the construction of a stable society. Given that equality between women and men is one of the areas covered under Section 75 and that which arguably requires the greatest degree of investment given the extent of the inequalities and the fact that it affects 100% of the population, it is highly ironic that the sector which was actively working towards equality in this area – i.e. the women's sector, has been

one of the most affected by the transition to Peace II. Any new solution developed for the sector must learn from the reasons for casualties in the Peace Programme.

## **Contribution of the Voluntary and Community Sector**

Supporting the work of the Task Force is not a commitment to resourcing and supporting the work of the Sector. This is the level of commitment required.

'Pathways for Change' refers to the requirement on public authorities to consult on matters relating to Section 75 and refers to the role designated to voluntary and community organisations in the consultation process. That role is meaningless without adequate resources to carry it out. The women's sector has been deluged with consultation documents. It has been invited to comment on every issue from health and social services, museum development, roads and canals to the school curriculum. It has

been incredibly frustrating to witness volumes of documents arriving on desks, knowing that we could make a useful contribution and not having the womanpower to do so. Equally frustrating is the knowledge that we have now 'been consulted with' and our silence can be interpreted as acquiescence. Structures and processes to facilitate consultation with the sector must be equipped with resources to make it effective. The community and voluntary sector as a link between government and civic society has an important role to play in enhanced governance. But it must be acknowledged and resourced. Furthermore, consultation is ineffective if there is only a requirement to consult - the requirement needs to be to act on the results of the consultation.

## **Key Themes**

'Pathways for Change' refers to a '*number of organisations*' receiving funding for community development activity. A number

# "if it is good to empower women in 1998 why, is it not in 2003?"

don't! The rural women's sector is an excellent example of a sector which falls between the remit of government departments. Despite years of persistent attempts, the sector has not managed to secure mainstream government funding. The Department of Social Development (DSD) perceives the rural women's sector as a rural, and therefore the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) concern and DARD perceive the sector as a women's, therefore DSD's, concern. We believe we should be the concern of both! A partnership between the voluntary and community sector and the government will be limited in its effectiveness if government departments do not develop partnership approaches in working with each other to resource organisations which are not neatly categorised and cut across the remit of a number of departments.

The Task Force refers to the development of a programme to

support 'local community development activity'. The definition of this is crucial. An earlier section of the report refers to an interpretation of communities which includes both area based communities and communities of interest. The definition of community development should also include communities of interest – otherwise the risk is that the work carried out by, for example, community based women's groups will be excluded, even though it is community development activity.

## **Collaboration**

While we would support the principle of collaboration, the implementation presents the women's sector with an interesting challenge. There is a risk in collaboration for the women's sector. The sector has a social change agenda and is underpinned by the principle of gender equality. Any collaboration involving the women's sector must also be underpinned by a principle to

gender equality - reflected in practice. Failure to do this would result in the dilution of this agenda. Quite frankly, given the mammoth nature of the task to achieve gender equality, it is an agenda which cannot afford to be diluted. There is, of course, an opportunity in collaboration for the women's sector but a misleading one unless all the players share an active commitment to gender equality. For a collaborative strategy to be successful – it needs careful thinking and negotiation.

## **Social Investment**

We are also concerned about a strategy which focuses on issues such as 'deprivation', 'vulnerability', etc as it suggests that only people who fall into these categories should benefit from community activity. It is another consequence of the document's failure to place an equal emphasis on the social change component to community development activity. For example, women's development and gender equality work need to



work with women at all levels of society, regardless of social status. Women who may be financially and educationally well off may be prevented from progressing in their jobs or in society by gender barriers (absence of childcare, organisational culture, etc.). There must be opportunities to address these needs.

### **Elements of an approach**

To conclude, while both document and debate are welcome and the shift in thinking to focus on outcomes rather than outputs is particularly welcome, the document has its limitations. It is overly focused on regional initiatives, papers and debates which take place at that level and the picture it paints in terms of documents, papers, the Task Force, the compact and partnerships bears little resemblance to the reality at a county or community level. It does not appear to be informed by a rural perspective in any way. And, the particular needs and circumstances of

sectoral groups actively working towards social change such as women's organisations are not adequately reflected in the document.

In order for this initiative to address the complex and diverse needs of the voluntary and community sector in a meaningful way, it must reflect 'out of the box' thinking. While the solutions developed do not need to be complex, they need to be sufficiently flexible and creative to do justice to the complexity of the sector. They must also see the sector's role in being an active agent in social change as a crucial part for its responsibility.

**Marie Crawley**  
**Fermanagh Women's Network**



# What's in it for rural young people?

Direct funding, primarily through European sources, to many community and voluntary sector organisations has developed capacity and enabled new and innovative programmes to be delivered that meet young people's needs. However, local groups especially in rural areas have not fully benefitted from this due to the level of bureaucracy required and the need for training and employment outputs.

These programmes, although beneficial in their own right, have provided only a short-term solution to long term needs. We are all committed to building rural communities that are vibrant and sustainable. To help achieve this we need to be less ad-hoc and develop a more strategic response that includes a range of programmes that encompass social and economic development. These need to be based on the needs of young people themselves and ensure maximum benefit for rural communities.

Alongside providing resources to deliver programmes at a more strategic level, existing resources could also be used more effectively. Recent funding through the Millennium Halls Programme has opened up and developed much needed facilities. The challenge now is to maximise the potential of these facilities especially in catering for the needs of young people. Short term funding has also resulted in recruitment and retention difficulties in many projects. Rural communities have lost many qualified and experienced workers. We cannot continue to allow this to happen.

The Task Force within the document

rightly acknowledges the key contribution the voluntary and community sector has made to date especially valuing the advocacy and campaigning work done to highlight current issues. There is now an urgent requirement to lobby for core funding to maintain, develop and maximise its potential.

The voluntary and community sector has demonstrated how they are willing to take calculated risks in delivering programmes and courage to produce quantifiable outputs, this needs to be encouraged and supported. They have also made a major contribution in developing innovative programmes that meet identified need and effective responses to government policies and targets in relation to New Targeting Social Need (TSN), Equality etc. The need to be accountable and ensure value for money is recognised however the current audit culture has the potential to diminish the real contribution that the voluntary and community sector can make.

It is now an opportune time for the region with the development of the Children's and Young Persons Strategy through the Office of the First and

Deputy First Minister (OFM/DFM) and the Department of Education's Youth Work Strategy alongside the impending Review of Rural Development Policy. Together they have the potential to ensure a more integrated and cohesive response to meeting rural young people's needs.

Many of the issues which face rural young people are multi-faceted. No single service can deal with the challenges of addressing these alone. They require a co-ordinated response based on an audit of existing services, partnership between government departments, with the business sector and with community and voluntary organisations. Not least services need to be shaped by the views of young people themselves and by their direct involvement in delivering services and support to their peers. The challenge for social and economic policy and the task for statutory and voluntary organisations is to work with young people to create a rural environment which offers a positive future, one in which they have a role in shaping. Therefore, the challenge for the Task Force is to ensure that the voluntary and community sector are adequately resourced to make a full and active contribution to this.

**Caroline Breakey**  
Youth Action



# Rural Divisions- Tacit realities

After reading the Task Force document 'Pathways for Change' I thought about how ten years ago I chaperoned a group from Northern Ireland on a visit to America – my first time there. I remember going into a Church where we had been asked to talk about our community, and being greeted enthusiastically with the words 'Hi, how are you – and are you a Protestant or a Catholic?' I was momentarily taken aback, because it was the first time in my fairly long life that I had been asked *directly* where my loyalties might lie. What seemed an innocent enough question to an American momentarily brought me back to the automatic 'whatever you say, say nothing' reaction.

Here we don't have to ask – we can use the code: name, address, school, sports and so on. Checking out, and then knowing what to say and what not to say quickly becomes a habit. It is part of the acceptable face of a divided society – where we all get on the best especially when we don't really talk to each other, when there is much left unsaid.

It is important for the Task Force to recognise that years of conflict, nurtured by this division, have left a scarred society. Changes are possible but fragile, and segregation remains the norm. If we are thinking about resourcing the community / voluntary sector then at the centre of this has to be some strategic thinking about how we address the deeply rooted division, our own kind of 'route map'. Peace building work means different things to different people – and rightly so: we need to value this diversity of approaches because they can all contribute in various ways.

The long term nature of peace building work is universally acknowledged – we are pragmatic enough to know that peace isn't just the absence of violence; that there are much harder challenges involved.

We can see around us the need for slow and patient work, the need for healing, for building new and stronger relationships.

What is the present reality of relationships in rural communities? What changes do you see in the area in which you live? Are villages mainly Catholic villages or Protestant villages – increasingly so? Where do people shop, socialise, who do they marry, how is land or property sold? Do you live in an area where religious and political leaders meet and work together for the whole community? How are new people welcomed to it – especially different cultures? Is it a safe community?

Are there places where people make links with others? – and are those places valued and supported?

The interest in the recent consultation on the 'Shared Future' document showed that people here want to examine how we might secure a fair and stable community. It isn't just about meeting together now and again – it's the nature of how we work together, how we manage different cultures, how we engage in critical dialogue, how we negotiate our relationships, how we move from compliance to commitment. Core to the measurement of community relations is the acknowledgment of unspoken tacit realities and the ability to communicate and use this knowledge with others. This means that peace building work isn't the warm and fuzzy stuff – it is hard, at times painful, and anything but a neat solution. In fact, common sense would tell you to have nothing to do with it. But we know that we can't afford to do nothing, and the fact is that many community groups and organizations take risks to do things differently, and it is crucial that this continues to grow, especially where there is evidence of greater separation. It is unthinkable that we might have a future that ignores the realities of division, only dealing with it when it erupts into violence. If we are serious about a shared and sustainable future then we need to seriously invest time, energy, and money in working towards it.

**Libby Keys**  
RCN Board Member

# Resourcing the Voluntary & Community Sector -

*Ensuring Services are Available and Accessible*



**T**here is a huge gap in the provision of accessible services to disabled people in the areas of health, education, transport, housing and employment, which currently exists. Disabled people have been prevented from accessing the most basic services within our society, prevented from gaining a basic level of education and as a result are not eligible to even make application for many jobs. Without the work of the many voluntary and community sector organisations who enable participation of the most marginalized people in our society, who is going to step in to provide these much needed services? Whilst the sector is widely valued in the communities within which they work, they have continued to struggle to remain in existence due to the piecemeal nature of funding and the lack of support from many areas in mainstreaming the work. Resourcing of this sector is about ensuring that services are available and accessible to the most vulnerable members of our society. Who is going to fill the gap?

**Catherine McCroy**  
**Equality 2000**

# Policy update

Now that we are back to Groundhog Day in the political process you might ask what is around on the policy table for the rural voluntary and community sector to consider? Quite a bit. One big question is how, in the absence of political progress, will all the policies and strategies tie together. For example, will the Review of Public Administration, as it struggles with the functions and structures to deliver effective public services on the one hand and democratic accountability on the other, be able to complete its task. This Review asked for comment by the end of February on five models ranging from the status quo to a reduced number of unitary authorities dealing with the full spectrum of services. It would be surprising if the review goes as far as the latter. But from a rural perspective, issues of rationalisation and centralisation will have to be watched very carefully. As with the hospital debate, it will be important not to be left with nothing to argue over.

Rural Community Network welcomed the decision on the ending of the 11+ but will also watch the dangers of a postcode lottery determining where investment in education or lack of it could lead to greater inequities. Government needs to ensure that the quality of education is as high in Castlederg as it is in Belfast! The rights to quality education must be maintained across the board.

Linked to 'Pathways for Change' is the other highly significant policy area, tackling community relations, developing a shared future. All the political parties were signing up to the importance of the community relations work that needed to happen to tackle sectarianism, racism and other ills within society. It is just that we have to do a lot more about it in order to get off the treadmill of reducing all our politics to a sectarian headcount. The challenges are there within rural communities and for Rural Community Network itself. We acknowledge, that as we take forward our community development work in rural areas much more has to be done to tackle sectarianism and community relations at every level from within local communities through the networks and within the institutions. This is work for the long haul.

The Community Support Plans being developed within District Councils will incorporate many of the above considerations and is another area where rural communities are playing a significant role. The Government Voluntary and Community Sector Forum has taken an interest in monitoring progress on the Community Support Plans. RCN would be interested to hear your experience on the development of the Support Plans.

**Niall Fitzduff**  
Rural Community Network