



**nirwn**  
**Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)  
Response To**

Public Consultation on  
**NI Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020**  
Department of Finance  
**January 2018**

NIRWN

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# 1 Introduction

**1.1** NIRWN's vision is a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

NIRWN key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme, funded by DAERA through DfC to give a voice to rural women

## **Mission**

NIRWN's mission, as a rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

**1.2** NIRWN, as a member of the Women's Regional Consortium funded by DAERA through DfC, welcome the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on NI Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020

**1.3** This response is informed by our membership's views on the Draft Programme for Government and through our recent research and stakeholder engagement on what the priorities are for rural women and the support they require going forward. It should be noted however that issuing a consultation the week leading up to Christmas does not allow community organisations such as NIRWN sufficient time to carry out specific focus groups.

## 2 Comments:

### 2.1 Introduction

#### 2.1.1 Context for Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018/20

NIRWN support the need for a NI Budgetary Outlook for the period 2018-2020 and acknowledge that the lack of a NI Executive in place has created a unique set of circumstances which has made it necessary to plan and project spend in their absence. NIRWN on behalf of our membership base is keen to respond to the Briefing and to work with the new Ministers, Executive and others in supporting the delivery of a new budget and Programme for Government for NI.

NIRWN is concerned that the cessation of support to Rural Affairs programmes highlighted as a potential cut in **all** three scenarios fundamentally alters the role and function of DAERA. It is our belief that a decision to remove all funding for rural affairs programmes within the Department is a decision that is outside of the scope of officials and could only be made by elected members.

#### 2.1.2 Context for Rural Women

##### Background

Women in NI today are still economically, culturally and politically unequal. Women continue to struggle with dominant patriarchal values and structures in every sphere of private and public life and are underrepresented in public life and the political arena where change may be influenced and enacted. The process of social change in NI has been impacted by the NI Conflict<sup>1</sup> and, Post Good Friday Agreement policy making has not improved matters for women in NI<sup>2</sup>. The lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is, in our view, a key factor hindering the development of a new shared future.

This is amplified for women in rural areas due to Access Poverty<sup>3</sup>. The accessibility of: education, training, work and childcare provision and; the cost and availability of public transport

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<sup>1</sup> **Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation**; Dr Helen Mc Laughlin

<sup>2</sup> **Review of Gender Issues in Northern Ireland**, Michael Potter NIAR 510-13, 2014

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/Documents/RalSe/Publications/2014/ofmdfm/1514.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> **TRPSI Framework**

<https://www.daerani.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/dard/Final%20Version%20-%20Consultation%20Document%20on%20Proposals%20for%200Successor%20Framework.pdf>

are factors in determining women's participation; particularly in rural areas<sup>4</sup>. Women in NI remain under represented in public<sup>5</sup> and political life<sup>6</sup> and rural women's participation in public and political life is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces.

### Historic Funding Deficit for Rural Women

Even within the wider women's sector rural women still need a stronger voice<sup>7</sup> and support: *'There are also stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery to women's groups between rural and urban (1.3% v 98.7%)<sup>8</sup>*. NIRWN provides the regional rural element of support to women through the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme (resourced by DAERA Rural Affairs Programmes). The vision of this Programme is: *That women living in disadvantage in both Urban and Rural will be provided with the specialist support they require to enable them to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion.*

An independent Evaluation of this Consortium work<sup>9</sup> concluded that rural women needed additional financial support in this Programme:

*'The rural investment in proportional terms is not sufficient to animate and build critical mass versus urban interests (circa 20% of staff resources in the Consortium are linked to rural delivery i.e. two 25-hour posts in NIRWN) which is out of step with the proportion of rural dwellers in NI'*

It is imperative that women in rural areas have proposed future budgets rural proofed<sup>10</sup> to ensure the inequity of Government resourcing does not continue.

NIRWN understand the need to rationalize spend in the current economic climate. We would highlight that NI Government funding support for the work of our organisation (the only dedicated regional service to support rural women in their communities) is now 13% of what it was in 2007; any further reduction would result in no provision for rural women post March 2018.

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<sup>4</sup> Rural Women's Manifesto *Rural Women Speak* NIRWN June 2015

[http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women\\_s%20manifesto%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women_s%20manifesto%20final%20(1).pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Women and Public Appointments in NI

[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/11914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/11914.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Women in Politics and the NI Assembly [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem\\_exec\\_review/women-in-politics.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/reports/assem_exec_review/women-in-politics.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Review of Government Funding for Women's Groups and Organisations, 2012

<sup>9</sup> Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Rural Needs Act, 2016

## 2.2 How the Briefing on Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020 will impact on Rural women

### 2.2.1 Programme for Government Priorities

The Draft Programme for Government for the jurisdiction targets ‘a strong, competitive, *regionally balanced* economy’<sup>11</sup>. Targeting such an outcome in consideration of the debate at hand raises obvious questions of substantive redistribution to correct chronic urban/rural structural differentials. Yet, as things stand, (i) despite its evident meaningfulness and effectualness, the rural women’s sector work under review remains profoundly under-resourced, while, more worrying still, (ii) actualisation of the mooted cessation of rural affairs programming would have a devastating effect on such work at the organisational level (with an anticipated knock-on destabilising effect on provision for disadvantaged women across the Regional Women’s Consortium at large). How will the Department of Finance ensure this balance is redressed in the new budget; as per The Rural Needs Act 2016<sup>12</sup> without financing Rural Affairs Programmes? This is the first proposed budget which is required by the Rural Needs Act 2016 to rural proof proposals. As such we would expect to see a rebalancing of funding for rural women in line with the Programme for Government Outcome ‘We prosper through a strong, competitive, **regionally balanced economy**’. This should mean an increase in resources for rural women in real terms and not a cessation of support. The current proposals would mean women in our two cities would receive support (through [Regional Infrastructure Support Programme](#)) but rural women can expect none.

### 2.2.2 Loss of Service Support (Rural Affairs & Women’s Regional Consortium)

Rural Community Support Structures are the backbone and the lifeblood of rural communities; where rural communities are thriving, it is inevitably being driven by a vibrant community support structure. Those communities that lack rural community support structures are left experiencing further social and financial deprivation and inevitably a lack of community ‘on the ground’ expertise to address it.

The three scenarios set out by DAERA **all** propose a complete cessation of Rural affairs Programming. The removal of all support for the Rural Affairs programmes funded by DAERA means a cessation of funding to Rural Community Network, NI Rural Womens’ Network, the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2016/19/pdfs/ni\\_20160019\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2016/19/pdfs/ni_20160019_en.pdf)

Rural Support Networks, Rural Support, Social Farming and Step Up to Sustainable Employment. Whilst the RYE programme is coming to an end we believe the TRPSI resource budget should be retained to meet emerging need in rural communities.

Rural and peripheral communities are the most likely to be impacted by Brexit leading to a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty for communities, farmers and farming families. In light of the end of the EU Rural Development Programme funding in 2020 along with the uncertainties created by Brexit. Now, more than ever, these social support systems will be needed. The Department needs to fully understand the contribution these agencies make to supporting and working alongside rural communities to provide essential advice guidance and support for the work they do at local level. Local groups will be less likely to be able to meet Charity Commission regulations, will submit fewer applications to RDP and other funders leading to a deterioration in quality of life for rural residents. The cessation of funding for Rural Affairs programmes will have a huge direct impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized in rural communities. Collectively our work supports rural community groups to provide key services in their communities like luncheon clubs, youth clubs, play groups, creches, and peacebuilding work addressing the issues of shared space and social isolation. Our work supports these groups to not only avail of the opportunities offered under the Rural Development Programme but to also lever in funding from a wide range of independent funders to their areas – providing much needed additional resources to these communities. With our help, groups are working right across rural NI to provide for and address local needs.

The DAERA proposal to remove all funding for third sector organisations from its budget lines is a retrograde step and directly contrary to commitments made by government in the Concordat between the Community and Voluntary Sector and the NI Government: “The provision of funding and other forms of support by Government is an important means of strengthening the capacity of the voluntary and community sector and enabling it to contribute effectively to the attainment of government objectives.”

As a key partner within the Women’s Regional Consortium<sup>13</sup> NIRWN remain profoundly concerned at the budgetary briefing’s scenario setting on rural affairs programming, to include the withdrawal of monies required to sustain vital delivery through NIRWN and, in turn,

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<sup>13</sup><https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/regional-infrastructure-support-programme>.

associated delivery across the wider Consortium.

Recent departmental commissioned research underlined the distinct need for, and meaningfulness and effectualness of, this rural provision, noting, for example, that ‘the rural element of the [Consortium] is *highly rated* by the rural women’s groups/women they serve’, and that the contribution such rural endeavour makes to ‘central government policy influence ... is of *key importance* to the rural constituency<sup>14</sup>’.

This rural provision originated in policy development that specifically recognised the additional interacting structural barriers affecting disadvantaged women in rural isolation, such as lack of access to transport and local service provision. Such shortfalls may be partly associated with enduring government underinvestment in rural affairs, as compared to urban. Current funding of the wider women’s sector reflects this rural/urban imbalance.

### Real Cost Savings?

In relative terms the budget of £1.8 million for the TRPSI resource budget is a small amount of money to cover the whole of rural Northern Ireland. The same size of budget is applied to small geographical communities in urban settings in programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal. Rural communities have never had these levels of budgets or investments. With immediate effect the scenarios presented by the DAERA will have an impact on all rural community development groups which have limited reserves. With no indication of future funding or budget outlines staff will have to be put on protective notice. This will certainly be the case for NIRWN.

Boards and committees with limited reserves operating within the parameters of both company and charity law will have to plan for immediate wind down. This sector does not have the luxury of planning a voluntary exit scheme nor incurring the time scales that they would set of nine months or more, it would be immediate and would take no account of the wider commitments and obligations they have. This would be a highly detrimental scenario because once these organisations close they cannot be easily replicated and the institutional knowledge and skills they have built over decades will be lost. The lack of budgetary planning and the late announcement of cuts means organisations who rely on statutory funding for a significant part of their budget must enact decision making in a very short time. This is unfair on staff and on

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<sup>14</sup> Morrow Gilchrist Associates, op. cit., p.40-41. High levels of satisfaction among ‘women on the ground’ was also noted in respect of Consortium work at large. Ibid. p. 20 and p.22.

organisations who have been working hard to keep within the governance codes of both company and charitable law. There is no help or assistance being offered to those funded organisations.

## **2.3 Overarching Comments and Concerns moving Forward with a Budget 2018-20**

### **2.3.1 CEDAW**

DAERA is currently the only Department in the Executive helping NI meet its CEDAW Article 14<sup>15</sup> obligations and NIRWN has been named in successive reports as the only government supported dedicated resource for rural women. The next CEDAW shadow reports are due in by June 2018; what will NI report as their commitment to Article 14 if they proceed with the cessation of all Rural Affairs Programming?

### **2.3.2 Rural Needs Impact Assessment (Proofing)**

NIRWN is dismayed that no full Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken on the Budget Outlook overall. When questioned at a stakeholder briefing event on 18 January at CAFRE, Greenmount DAERA officials stated that the NI Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020 is a high-level outline of scenarios and options and that a “High Level Impact Assessment” process has been carried out. In our view the Department of Finance is ignoring its statutory duty to have due regard to the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas.

### **2.3.3 Equality**

NIRWN is concerned that whilst the Draft Programme for Government has a clearly stated Outcome; ‘We have a more equal society’ there is an absence of an explicit and robust Equality Impact Assessment accompanying these consultation materials. The onus should not be on consultees to highlight the potential equality impacts of a budget that will affect all citizens. At the briefing event referenced above we were assured that the DAERA had done some very ‘high level’ impact assessment. An example provided of a potential mitigating factor that they may put forward was to replace a resource budget with some capital budget to address the potential adverse impact on older males. It is the view of the NIRWN that this would not in any way

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article14>

mitigate against a resource spend cut. A proposed budget needs to have an EQIA and the EQIA needs to go out to consultation. It is very clear that each Department worked in silos to put forward their proposals and as such, they need to be viewed now in their entirety and amendments made to take account of equality impacts and to ensure regionally balanced spend.

### **2.3.4 Rural Development (BREXIT)**

The Draft Programme for Government Framework does not take account of the post referendum decision to exit the EU. As such we believe that any future budget must not be restricted to only delivering to the Programme for Government and statutory obligations. Consideration must now also be given to resourcing the preparations for and potential impacts of Brexit. The UK BREXIT decision has implications for rural women both in the context of EU funding and in light of human, economic and social rights that are currently protected by EU legislation.

In a context of extended austerity and associated rising vulnerability and poverty, compounded by socio-economic, political and legal uncertainty generated by the United Kingdom's impending exit from the European Union ('Brexit'), including uncertainty over the future of extant rights protections, the NIRWN remains profoundly troubled about the wider question of social justice and gender equality for these vulnerable female cohorts.

It has been observed that were Brexit, as projected, to result in significant economic damage and possibly further austerity, the adverse impact on everyday lives would most likely be gendered, with women, as compared to men, disproportionately affected,<sup>16</sup> further compounding such pre-existing gendered vulnerability and poverty.<sup>17</sup>

This debate is further complicated by concern at uncertainty over the wider relationship between Brexit and rural wellbeing in Northern Ireland (at the level of the economic and beyond), drawing on insight that rural areas (border regions especially) could be particularly vulnerable to any post-Brexit economic downturn and loss of European Union funding.

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<sup>16</sup> A. Jenichen, 'What will Brexit mean for gender equality in the UK?' Aston University: Birmingham, 2016. [Online]. Available at: [www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allId=285498](http://www.aston.ac.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allId=285498)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. This projection is informed by consideration of the gendered nature of recent economic shocks, particularly the United Kingdom recession-austerity model that followed the 2008 global financial crisis

There has been no substantial, dedicated mainstream rural development fund in Northern Ireland; we have relied upon European funding to largely finance rural development initiatives since the early 1990's. BREXIT therefore creates fear and concern about the future of rural development. The current Rural Development Programme, is worth £630 million in total, with the Rural Development Priority 6 element worth £80 million of which, 80% is Exchequer funded.

We would urge the Executive to protect this level of funding at a minimum going forward. We would like the scope of activities currently supported, in line with identified need by rural communities, to be sustained. We need assurance that rural development and rural affairs as a policy priority for this Executive and doesn't fall off the agenda; particularly as we face forward to prepare our rural communities for the impacts of a post Brexit rural economy.

### **3 Concluding Remarks**

NIRWN are pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020. We look forward now a final Budget 2018-2020 which takes account of; section 75 obligations, gender budgeting and rural proofing to effect tangible improvement in the lives of rural women. Rural women and their families need actions; furthermore they need these actions resourced. We welcome the aspiration to address regional imbalance, for too long now rural women have been under resourced<sup>18</sup> for support and this needs to change. DAERA cannot be viewed by others as the 'one stop shop' for rural delivery however the Rural Affairs programming budget is a very small (in the scale of the Executive budget) but vital resource that reaches across our jurisdiction to support rural communities, consistently illustrating value for money and must be retained. We look forward to supporting the Executive, rural women and others with the development of a fair 'regionally balanced' budget with associated Programme for Government action plans.

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<sup>18</sup> Review of Government funding for the Women's sector OFMDFM/DSD 2012 and Evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (Final Report, June 2015)