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Dear Sir/Madam,

Joint Response from Rural Community Network to the Call for Evidence on:

(1) Display of Flags and Emblems Bill

(2) A New Good Relations Framework

Introduction

Rural Community Network (RCNⁱ) welcomes the opportunity to provide a rural perspective on the development of the Good Relations Framework and the proposed approach to Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking.

- RCN regularly engages at a strategic level on policy developments that have implications for rural communities, through formal consultation responses, direct engagement with government and statutory bodies, and by contributing rural evidence to wider policy and evidence bases.
- We have considered these two consultations together because, while they address different policy areas, both have significant implications for community relations, cohesion, identity and the experience of living in small, interconnected rural communities.
- The turnaround period for both consultations has been particularly short, falling during the summer break and immediately ahead of what is traditionally an exceptionally busy September period for policy engagement, consultations, events and launches.
- Given the available timeframe, we have focused this response on key rural issues emerging from RCN's existing evidence, experience and engagement. We have also consulted with our **Beyond Belfast Practitioners Forum**ⁱⁱ to test the issues raised with practitioners working directly with communities across Northern Ireland.

- For these reasons, we have presented our response in bullet-point format, focusing on the key issues and considerations we believe should inform both pieces of work.

Rural Practitioner Engagement: Beyond Belfast

- RCN's Beyond Belfast Practitioners Forum brings together practitioners working with communities outside Belfast and the main urban centres, providing a valuable space to share local intelligence, emerging issues and practical experience.
- The Forum is particularly important at a time when the face and demographic profile of rural Northern Ireland is changing.
- Rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse, with new communities, migrant families and people from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds increasingly living, working and raising families across rural Northern Ireland.
- These changes bring new opportunities to build relationships and strengthen communities, but they can also raise new questions around identity, belonging, inclusion, cultural expression and how communities respond to difference. RCN's experience of intercultural workⁱⁱⁱ, including through programmes designed to support inclusion and participation, demonstrates the importance of creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet and build relationships.
- At the same time, it is important to recognise that rural communities are not all the same. While some communities are closely interconnected across traditional community boundaries for example with schooling or social activities in community venues, others remain more segregated, with those divisions sometimes visible in everyday life and in the physical environment.
- This practitioner perspective is therefore important in ensuring that policy reflects how community relations work in practice across rural Northern Ireland, rather than assuming that approaches developed primarily through an urban lens will automatically translate to smaller, dispersed and interconnected communities.
- The Forum also highlights the considerable strengths and assets within rural communities. Trusted local organisations, local knowledge, community groups, sports clubs, schools and informal networks can provide important spaces for people to meet, build relationships and respond constructively to tensions.
- RCN considers the experience and insight of rural practitioners to be an important evidence base for both the development of the new Good Relations Framework and consideration of Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking.

1. Good Relations Framework

- RCN welcomes the development of a new Good Relations Framework and the opportunity to ensure that it reflects the realities of Northern Ireland today, rather than simply carrying forward an approach developed in 2013.

- Rural communities should be explicitly recognised within the Framework. Rural is not simply a smaller version of urban. Small populations, geographical distance, close-knit relationships, limited community infrastructure and the importance of shared spaces can all shape how good relations work in practice.
- The close interconnectedness of rural communities can be both a strength and a challenge. Strong informal networks and trusted local organisations can help prevent tensions and build cohesion, but disagreements or divisions can also have a particularly visible and lasting impact in small communities.
- The Framework should recognise the relationship between good relations and wider rural inequalities. Poverty, deprivation, transport difficulties, access to services and differences in local infrastructure can affect people's ability to participate fully in community life and can influence relationships between and within communities.
- There should be greater recognition of the role played by rural community organisations, sports clubs, schools, youth workers and other local institutions in creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet, participate and build relationships. Schools are often among the most important shared institutions within rural communities and should be recognised within the Good Relations Framework as part of wider community infrastructure. In many rural areas, schools are not simply places of education; they are important points of connection for children, families and the wider community.
- At a time of significant pressure on resources across public services in Northern Ireland, integrated education should be considered as one potential option within wider discussions about the sustainability of rural services and community infrastructure. Where local circumstances, demand and educational considerations support it, the development of integrated provision may provide an opportunity to sustain educational provision in places where two separate schools may not remain viable, while also creating everyday opportunities for children and families from different backgrounds to learn, participate and build relationships together. This should form part of a broader consideration of how education planning can support both sustainable rural service provision and good relations, rather than treating these as separate policy objectives. Funding and programme design should take account of the capacity constraints facing smaller rural organisations. Geographical distance, limited staffing, lack of awareness of programmes and the absence of paid community development infrastructure can all create barriers to participation.
- The new Framework should consider emerging and changing influences on rural community relations, including paramilitarism and organised criminality, polarisation, misinformation and online harms, economic pressures, migration and increased diversity, changing identities, cultural expression, cross-border relationships and the impact of global events.
- There is a particular need for the Framework to capture the experiences of people and communities who may currently be missing from Good Relations programmes and activity, including migrant and minority ethnic communities living in rural areas. This should form part of the evaluation and monitoring of the new Framework. If the Framework is to be effectively rural-proofed, its implementation and outcomes should

be assessed to establish whether rural communities, including newer and more diverse rural communities, are experiencing the intended benefits and whether particular barriers remain.

- Policymakers should consider what would make Good Relations activity and funding more accessible to smaller rural organisations and communities, including those without dedicated paid staff or specialist community relations capacity.
- RCN considers that paramilitarism and organised criminality should be recognised explicitly within the new Good Relations Framework. While these issues have clear justice and community safety dimensions, they are also fundamentally Good Relations issues because they can affect who feels able to participate, speak, lead and use community spaces.
- In rural communities, the impact can be particularly difficult to see through conventional measures of community relations. Segregation and contested space may be maintained through avoidance, informal restrictions, intimidation and coercive behaviours, without resembling a conventional urban interface.
- Paramilitary and criminal control can affect access to community facilities, participation in civic and cultural life, reporting of crime, community leadership and trust in public authorities. It can also intersect with drug supply and drug debt, the recruitment and exploitation of young people, violence against women and girls, and the particular vulnerability of migrant workers and newcomer families.
- RCN's rural engagement also highlights the importance of low anonymity and overlapping informal networks. In small communities, people may know perpetrators, their families or those associated with them, creating additional barriers to reporting concerns or seeking support.
- The Framework should therefore recognise that good relations cannot be considered separately from community safety, coercion, power and people's ability to participate freely in community life. Rural approaches should reflect the different ways these issues manifest outside traditional urban interface areas.
- RCN also considers that the Framework should recognise the importance of relationships across and between different parts of Northern Ireland, including North-South, East-West and cross-border relationships. For many rural communities, particularly those close to the border, these relationships are part of everyday social, economic, cultural and community life. Cross-border services, shared infrastructure, family and community networks and participation in activity across the border can all contribute to good relations. The Framework should therefore consider how policy can support rather than unintentionally constrain these relationships, including in the context of wider discussions around an island-wide future.
- RCN would encourage policymakers to consider the following question:

What would policymakers need to understand about good relations in a rural community that they would not understand from reading the Framework or consultation documents?

Members perspectives:

In rural communities, silence can sometimes be mistaken for good relations. People may not report incidents or raise concerns because they don't want to cause trouble, damage relationships or be identified as the person who complained. The absence of recorded conflict does not necessarily mean that good relations exist — sometimes it simply means that people don't feel able to speak.

In a rural community, you can't always just walk away from a difficult relationship. The person you disagree with might also be your

In a small rural community, you can't always separate community relations from community safety. People know who is involved, where people live and who they are connected to. That can affect whether people feel able to speak, report something, use a facility or get involved in community life.

Good relations looks different in rural areas because access matters. If you don't have a bus, a local service or a community facility you can actually get to, you can be excluded from community life before good relations even becomes a conversation.

In a small rural community, speaking out isn't always as simple as making a complaint. People may know who is involved, who they are connected to and who they will have to see again. There can be a fear of being labelled a 'tout', of causing problems for your family or community, or of becoming known as the person who spoke up. That can affect who feels able to speak, who feels able to challenge something and, ultimately, who has a voice in the community. Good relations therefore has to consider not just whether people have a right to speak, but whether they feel safe and able to use that voice.

Newcomers can experience rural communities differently. Strong existing networks can make it difficult to find your way into community life, particularly where transport is limited, there is little anonymity or there are language and cultural barriers. But rural community organisations can also be one of the strongest ways of building connections and belonging, helping people move from being new to becoming part of the community.

In rural communities, good relations are also shaped by geography. When local services, transport and community facilities are lost, it can affect who can participate, who feels connected and who has opportunities to meet and build relationships with others. Rurality therefore changes how good relations are experienced; something that may not be visible if we only look at relationships between communities without considering the places and services that bring people together.

In a rural community, there may be only a small number of shared spaces; the community hall, sports club, school, church, shop or village street. These spaces can bring people together, but they can also make people feel excluded if they are perceived as belonging to one particular community or identity. What is displayed in these spaces, including flags and emblems, can therefore influence who feels welcome, comfortable and able to participate.

Good relations in rural communities often happens without being called Good Relations. It can happen through a sports club, youth group, community association, volunteering or simply people working together to solve a local problem. These everyday interactions build trust, relationships and a sense of shared purpose. Policymakers need to recognise that the ordinary infrastructure of rural community life can be just as important to good relations as formal programmes.

Good relations cannot be separated from the conditions in which people live. In rural communities, poverty, rising costs, poor transport and the loss of local services can leave people with less opportunity to participate, connect and feel part of community life. Strong local infrastructure and community organisations can help build connection and resilience, while its absence can deepen isolation and perceptions of unfairness.

Crises can sometimes bring people together in ways that everyday life does not. When a rural community faces flooding, storms, fire or another emergency, people often work together regardless of background or identity — checking on neighbours, clearing roads, sharing resources and supporting those who need help. These experiences can build trust and practical solidarity. Good relations are therefore not only built by talking about difference; they can also be built by working together when a community needs it most.

In a small rural community, the numbers can tell you very little. A dataset might show no recorded incidents, but that doesn't mean there are no tensions or barriers. People may have stopped attending, young people may avoid certain places, or a family may have left because they no longer felt comfortable. In rural communities, listening to people's experiences and understanding the local context is essential to seeing what the numbers cannot.

2. Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking

- RCN recognises the particular importance of context when considering flags and emblems in rural communities. The impact of a display can depend on its location, duration, density, purpose and the circumstances of the community.
- There should be a clear distinction between:
 - time-bound celebration and permanent territorial marking;
 - sporting or community identity and intimidation;
 - event-linked and exclusionary displays;
 - locally agreed arrangements and unilateral displays; and
 - short-term bunting or flags and the long-term saturation of a village, route or community.
- In small rural villages, the concept of a “sensitive place” can have particular significance. A community hall, school, church, chapel, sports club, shop, health centre, bus stop or village street may be one of very few shared spaces available to the whole community.
- Policymakers should therefore carefully consider how terms such as “sensitive place”, “vicinity” and “shared communal space” are defined and interpreted in a rural context.
- A rural community may not conform neatly to a single physical settlement. A community may extend across a number of small villages, while a single village may contain distinct areas with different histories, identities and relationships. What constitutes a “shared communal space” or “vicinity” therefore needs to reflect how people actually live and interact, rather than relying solely on administrative or geographical boundaries.
- This is particularly important in the context of the changing demographic profile of rural Northern Ireland. New communities and people from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds may experience flags and emblems differently from longer-established residents. The approach therefore needs to consider not only historic patterns of identity and territorial marking, but also how displays are experienced by newer members of rural communities.
- RCN recognises the value of informal local agreements that have developed in some rural communities around the timing, location and removal of flags or bunting. These arrangements may not always be visible to policymakers precisely because they are working.
- Where locally negotiated and time-bound arrangements are working, there should be consideration of how these approaches can be supported rather than defaulting immediately to enforcement.

- Silence should not automatically be interpreted as consent. In small communities, people may be reluctant to complain because they know those involved, fear repercussions or do not want to damage wider family and community relationships.
- A lack of formal complaints should therefore not necessarily be interpreted as acceptance or an absence of concern.
- Any expectation that local volunteers, community workers, clergy, youth workers, sports leaders or others will mediate local disputes must take account of their own safety and the fact that they may have to continue living alongside the people involved.
- Mediation and community relations capacity is uneven across rural Northern Ireland. Some areas have experienced practitioners and trusted intermediaries, while others have limited infrastructure and no paid community development or youth work capacity.
- Where dialogue, mediation or pre-enforcement engagement is expected, consideration must be given to who will provide this support, what skills and protections are required, and how this work will be resourced.
- Any reporting or notification system should take account of rural digital exclusion, older residents and the particular difficulty of maintaining anonymity in small communities.
- Responsibility and enforcement need to be clear. In rural communities, there can be uncertainty about who owns or manages particular pieces of land, street furniture or community space and who is responsible for responding when a concern is raised.
- There should be a clear pathway from: reporting → assessment → local engagement → mediation/removal → enforcement with clear responsibility between Departments, councils, PSNI and other relevant bodies.
- Policymakers should also consider:

What would policymakers need to understand about flags and emblems in a rural community that they would not understand from reading the legislation or consultation documents?

Members perspectives:

You can't always understand what a flag means just by looking at it. In a rural community, its meaning can depend on where it is, why it is there and what it represents to the people who live around it.

In a rural community, you can't always just walk away from a difficult relationship. The person you disagree with might also be your neighbour, someone you work with or someone you meet at the local shop or sports club or cultural event. That can make poor relationships harder to escape, but it can also create opportunities to build understanding because people continue to share the same spaces and community.

Intimidation isn't always about someone making a direct threat. Sometimes it is about how a place makes you feel and the choices you make as a result - where you go, where you don't go, or whether you feel comfortable bringing your children there. In a small rural community, people may simply know what a particular flag or emblem represents without anyone ever having to say it.

In a rural community, you can't always avoid a place that makes you uncomfortable. There may be one road into the village, one shop, one community hall or one place to meet. If something makes you feel that a space isn't for you, the choice can be to stop going altogether. Nobody may report that as a flags and emblems issue, but the result can still be withdrawal from community life and weaker relationships.

In a small rural community, people often know who is behind a flag or emblem. You know the family, organisation or group involved, and you may have to interact with them every day. That means the impact can be about the relationships and history within the community, not simply the symbol itself.

Flags and emblems can be an important part of identity, culture, celebration and a sense of place. The issue isn't necessarily the flag itself, but what it means in a particular place and how it is experienced by others. We need to understand both sides of that — the right to express identity and the impact that expression can have on other people.

3. Rural Evidence, Data and Impact

- RCN considers that effective rural proofing requires more than demonstrating that rural communities have been considered. It requires understanding where impacts may differ in rural areas, why they differ and what this means in practice.
- Some of the issues that matter most to Good Relations in rural communities are difficult to capture through conventional datasets. Local relationships, belonging, exclusion, informal arrangements and how particular displays are experienced within a small community may not appear in administrative data or Northern Ireland-wide statistics.
- An absence of quantitative evidence should not be assumed to mean an absence of impact. In small rural communities, experiences of tension, exclusion or intimidation may be under-reported because people know those involved and may be reluctant to raise concerns.

- Rural impact assessment should therefore draw on qualitative evidence and local practitioner knowledge alongside quantitative data. The Beyond Belfast Practitioners Forum provides one mechanism for bringing this insight into policy development and identifying experiences that may not yet be visible through conventional datasets.
- This approach reflects RCN's own research practice. RCN is currently undertaking five pieces of lived-experience research across rural Northern Ireland, combining community evidence with relevant secondary data to build a fuller picture of rural experiences. This work also recognises that rural communities are not homogeneous, using four rural typologies — peri-urban, connected, unconnected and border — to explore how experiences and impacts can differ between places.
- RCN would encourage the future assessment, monitoring and evaluation of both the Good Relations Framework and Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking proposals to systematically incorporate rural community evidence, practitioner intelligence and qualitative experience alongside quantitative measures.
- This is particularly important as the demographic profile of rural Northern Ireland changes. Monitoring should consider whether newer and more diverse rural communities experience policies and community relations differently from longer-established populations.
- Better use of rural evidence will help policymakers understand not only whether policy has been implemented, but how it is experienced in different rural places and by different groups within those places.

4. A Common Rural Consideration

- While the Good Relations Framework and Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking proposals are distinct pieces of work, both demonstrate the importance of understanding how policy operates in small, dispersed and highly interconnected communities.
- Rural proofing should go beyond asking whether a policy applies to rural areas. It should consider how place, distance, population size, local relationships, community infrastructure and access to services affect how policy works in practice.
- Rural communities should not be treated as a single, homogeneous category. Experiences will differ between places depending on local history, demographics, geography, community infrastructure and relationships.
- At a time of significant demographic and social change across Northern Ireland, policy must be informed by the experiences of communities beyond Belfast and the main urban centres.
- This requires continued engagement with people working directly in rural communities and recognition of the role of trusted local organisations and practitioners in identifying emerging issues, supporting dialogue and strengthening community relationships.
- RCN would encourage policymakers to apply this approach consistently across both pieces of work, ensuring that rurality is considered not simply as a geographic category,

but as a factor that can shape how policy is experienced and how effective it is in practice.

5. Additional Rural and Border Considerations

Policy development for both the Good Relations Framework and Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking should more fully recognise the realities of rural and border communities. In border areas, everyday community life often operates across jurisdictions through family networks, education, employment, shopping, sport, faith, public services and community activity. Policy should therefore support North-South, East-West and local cross-border relationships as part of sustaining good relations.

Confidentiality and reporting require particular care in small rural communities. People may be reluctant to raise concerns where they could become identifiable through local knowledge, family connections or geography, particularly where issues relate to intimidation, coercion, paramilitary influence or community safety.

Both pieces of work should distinguish clearly between cultural expression, celebration, remembrance, community identity, political expression, territorial control and intimidation. The impact of a flag or emblem depends on its purpose, location, duration, density and local context.

Rural good relations should not be understood solely through traditional Protestant/Catholic or unionist/nationalist lenses. The Framework should also consider the experiences of migrant workers, newcomer families, minority ethnic communities, Traveller communities, mixed families and young people whose identities and experiences may not fit neatly within traditional categories.

Policymakers should avoid placing responsibility for dialogue or dispute resolution on local volunteers, clergy, sports leaders, community workers or trusted intermediaries without adequate support. Local relationships are important, but they cannot substitute for properly resourced mediation, safeguarding, community development and enforcement structures.

RCN recommends that both the Good Relations Framework and the Display of Flags and Emblems Bill are subject to a robust rural implementation test. This should assess how proposals will operate in border communities, dispersed settlements and areas with limited community infrastructure, and should evaluate whether rural communities experience outcomes differently from urban areas.

Finally, good relations and community safety should be considered together. In rural areas, intimidation, organised criminality, coercive control, drug-related harms, violence against women and girls, racism, sectarianism and paramilitary influence can overlap and shape whether people feel able to participate freely in community life.

Conclusion

RCN welcomes continued engagement on both the Good Relations Framework and Flags, Emblems and Territorial Marking. We would be happy to provide further rural evidence and practitioner insight from our networks as these proposals develop.

References

ⁱⁱ [Home - Rural Community Network](#)

ⁱⁱ [Beyond Belfast Capacity Building Project - Rural Community Network](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [ICI Programme | Intercultural Cross-Border Inclusion](#)