

# Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, HC 157

Wednesday 7 July 2021

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley; Bob Stewart.

Questions 1037 - 1049

### Witnesses

II: Louise Coyle, Director, NI Rural Women's Network; Kate Clifford, Director, Rural Community Network; Charmain Jones, Senior Cohesion Sharing and Integration Officer, Rural Community Network.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Louise Coyle, Kate Clifford and Charmain Jones.

Q1037 **Chair:** We now turn to our second panel. You are all welcome. I was going to apologise for keeping you waiting for so long, but I am sure you found what our first panel had to say as interesting and fascinating as we did. It probably does not need an apology, unless you have been dying to go to the loo or get a cup of tea, and have been terrified to leave your seat, just in case it ended early. My apologies for that, but it is great that you could join us this morning, and we thank you.

You heard my first question to the previous panel, which was about the experience of women in getting their voices not just heard but listened to, engaged with and encouraged to come in. We heard a pretty desolate picture from the first panel. Is that your experience, or do you have a different one?

**Louise Coyle:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. You are absolutely right: we work alongside the women you have just been speaking to, and we find them inspirational every day. I am sure you got a wee flavour this morning of how fantastic our women's sector really is. I am the director of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network. We are a membership-based organisation, so we speak on behalf of our membership.

I absolutely concur with the women who went before us on how difficult it is to get women's voices at the table. To get civic society in general heard has been challenging since pre-referendum and right through. Historically, women's voices are not invited to the table. I am quite fortunate that I have managed to get into a few spaces and places where we have had discussions with the Secretary of State, David Frost and Michael Gove before him, post the protocol.

However, on all of those occasions, I have been in a minority of women. In fact, not with the NIO but with Maroš Šefčovič and Michael Gove, I was one of two women representing civic society. I was going to say we are 50%, but we are 51% in Northern Ireland. That representation was not balanced or reflective. There are lots of deep debates and discussions about who is invited into those spaces, but somebody should be looking at the gender balance.

Is this reflective of Northern Ireland society, especially when, in those particular instances, they were called civic society engagement? Women are 50% of that civic society. On both those occasions where I was one of two women, the other woman was an academic. The onus then was really on me to communicate grassroots women's views, which is a lot of responsibility. There also comes a point where you feel reluctant to go into those spaces, because it is almost as though you are validating that way of engagement. It is not acceptable.



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**Kate Clifford:** Good morning, everyone. I will just do a quick introduction first of all. Thank you for the opportunity to present here today. Both I and Charmain work together for an organisation called Rural Community Network Northern Ireland. Unlike the other speakers, we do not engage solely in women's work, although we recognise it is a massively important part of the work that we do.

The answer to your question is that women are absent, and obvious by their absence, from many of the tables that we sit at. Unless Louise, Charmain and I are attending very many of the cross-border or north-south/east-west meetings, very often there is an absence of women there. We have a huge level of activism among women on the ground who are working very hard, at a local level, at sustaining and maintaining peace and peace-building in their communities. They are raising aspirations and hope within their communities, but their voices are very often either ignored or overlooked, or they do not have the confidence to sit at these tables; they find it too nerve-racking to do that. There is a capacity-building issue that needs to be addressed around that, but it is also not good enough to say that the door is open for women to sit there. There is an enabling argument to be made about supporting those women to sit in these types of events and engagements.

My other issue is around the institutions that exist in Northern Ireland. When you look at a lot of the organisations, they are fraternity organisations, in all their forms. Right from the churches to our loyal orders and bands, many of them are fraternal in their structure, infrastructure and traditions. We need to look at that, because they are very often the people who get invited to the table and, as such, women are removed from the voices that appear at those tables.

**Charmain Jones:** Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I really want to raise an issue that I find in my work. As Kate says, my work goes across the whole of rural Northern Ireland. I work outside Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. One of the themes that comes up regularly is the use of social media and how, particularly among women involved in good relations work and peace-building, there is a fear of raising your head above the parapet when it comes to online misogyny and hate crime.

Over the last year, and particularly during the pandemic, I have ended up having to do training across rural Northern Ireland, based on the issue of women who try to step forward and take risks, particularly in relation to peace-building work, but then the fear of being targeted online makes them either go back to what they were doing beforehand or afraid to step forward and say, "I am standing here", in terms of trying to build better relations across Northern Ireland. I have ended up having to do some workshops with rural women to try to build their capacity and self-esteem, and also to give them my experiences, as a peace-builder and as a woman working in the field for the last 21 years, of being online and doing good relations work, when it is sometimes not a very popular



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vocation. You would not really fall into it if you knew all the challenges that came with it, but women do step up and take those risks.

Because of the lack of opportunity for rural women, it has been the role of RCN and NIRWN over the last year to really try to build the capacity of women to step forward and take leadership roles, but the issue of social media comes up day in, day out, and even more so during the pandemic, when it has become more of a cultural background as people have not been able to meet face to face and have had to have all their conversations and dialogue behind a keyboard.

That, for me, is probably a piece of work that we will continue to do going forward. Something that I know all of our practitioners who work alongside me across rural Northern Ireland have been saying for the last six months at any temperature check is that we need something to protect the peace-builders and the risktakers, and women online.

**Q1038 Chair:** I represent the rural constituency of North Dorset. Sometimes, when we think of Northern Ireland, it often becomes very Belfast-centric in our conversations and analysis. Can we have some thoughts, please, from the three of you with regard to how the protocol is working, how it has been received and how it is analysed within rural Northern Ireland?

**Kate Clifford:** We recently undertook a temperature check with practitioners who are working in the field. We run a forum called the Beyond Belfast Forum, which recognises in particular that there are interfaces that exist outside of Belfast and the main towns and cities across Northern Ireland. There is a recognition that we have interfaces. They are invisible interfaces, but if you think about how we move around within spaces, we have a sectarian mind map that is inbuilt or ingrained in many of us. We know the places where we feel safe and comfortable, and where we will not find a cold house for our particular religious or political expression.

In this temperature check, we defined the problem. You will forgive the alliteration in this, but it is really telling. We have a perfect storm. We have the pandemic. We have paramilitarism on the rise and the constant threat of a return to violence. We have patriarchy, which is largely what we have discussed this morning. We have political instability and political unrest. We have political posturing. We have parades and we have propaganda. The protocol lands on top of all of that.

I am down to another "P": the prize for all of us in all of this is sustaining and maintaining peace on these islands. For me, in talking to the people we talk to, the responsibility of all of us is to maintain peaceful relations and to make this, as Eileen said, a safe place to live.

The difficulty for us is that we are in this perfect storm. We have ongoing high levels of poverty. We have a pandemic that is creating space between communities and not enabling difficult dialogue to take place. In all of that, we have political instability and uncertainty.



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We have a rhetoric coming from Government that talks about getting Brexit done. Brexit is not a one-off event. Brexit is a disentangling of a relationship and a divorce process that will take years to complete. The protocol is also evolving. Whether it is desired or not, the difficulty is that it is the only option that is now on the table. It is what has been delivered to us and upon us, so it is now about how we make the best of that. How do we ensure that people are not worse off and left feeling destitute or annexed in some way from their cultural identity?

The conversations that we have had with people have been very much about being left behind by political leaders. It is about the discourse being that “all Protestants believe” or “all nationalists believe”, and the nuance of the conversation has gone extreme green and extreme orange. I know that it is not grey in between those two things, but the colour in between has been lost in the conversation. As a result, people feel that they have to take positions and that they are disloyal, in some way, if they take a position that is the opposite one to the majority or to the other voices that are speaking more loudly.

When we get down to the conversations, what we know is that, right from the very start of Brexit, the beauty of the Good Friday agreement was disrupted. Right at the very start, there was an equilibrium that came with the Good Friday agreement that allowed us a cultural identity of choice. As soon as Brexit hit, there was an immediate scramble to reclaim that identity and cultural identity, and we retreated into the silos that we had grown up with—people like me who had grown up in this area. All of a sudden, our identity became front and centre. The question was, “Are we being annexed? Are we likely to be something other than what we are at present? Are we likely to be a united Ireland? Are we likely to be annexed from our British counterparts? Are we a place apart? Do we have special status?” Every time, it created a question around people’s identity, their cultural identity and their freedom to express that.

As peace-builders, we believe in respect, tolerance and understanding. It is the backbone of what we do. What we have fought very hard for has been this prize of peace. The difficulty for us, in all the posturing that goes on around trade, tariffs and trucks, is that civic society has been lost, and the dialogue, conversation and nuance has been utterly dissipated in the winning and losing arguments. That is not good enough for the people of Northern Ireland. We owe them more than that. They have been through enough.

**Chair:** Thank you, Kate. That was incredibly clear and very powerful. We are grateful to you for that.

Q1039 **Mr Goodwill:** That last piece of evidence was very telling and indicates that, as the political parties have become more extreme orange or extreme green, the engagement that Government have had—whether Stormont or, in particular, Westminster—has been with the ends of the extremes rather than with the centre. Maybe to follow up with Kate Clifford, how do you feel we can have people from the moderate centre



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listened to as well, and not have a situation where it is just those who seem to shout the loudest who get listened to?

**Kate Clifford:** For the last five years, we have been asking for civic dialogue and for spaces to have the difficult conversations. These issues are the ones that provided murder on our streets, on all sides of this community, and the whole community suffered. That is the price that we paid for the disruption that we had over the last 800, 100 or 40 years.

If we do not enable and support dialogue at community level, we will continue to create polarisation. What we need to do is to find spaces for these difficult conversations. We have done it. The reality is that the blueprint is there, because, as peace-builders, we have sat down and had the difficult conversations about the legacy of the Troubles, the impact of the Troubles on communities, and all of the issues that have lain within that. We have sat down with people who have been on polar-opposite sides of the Troubles over the last number of years, and the reality has been that people have found the ability to come to agreements and compromise. Without ever giving up their own cultural identity or beliefs, they have found ways to provide new understanding and tolerance.

I do not say this using rosy language and pretending that it is easy stuff. It is not. It is hard. The pandemic has made it really difficult to have dialogue, but there has to be an intention towards peace-building from all of our politicians. We have to now look at how we invest in finding space for dialogue, conversation and understanding.

The protocol is complex. It is really complex. I will not deny, even as we were listening in this morning to the conversations around Article 1, Article 2, the Human Rights Act, trade and tariffs, it is difficult stuff; it is complex stuff. People want to know, "How does this affect me? How does this affect my job? How does this affect my family? How does this affect who I am and what I stand for in terms of my cultural identity and my rights?" People have to be assured that that is not changing, and that assurance has to come from and will only come through civic dialogue.

Q1040 **Mr Goodwill:** Would you say that the two political parties in Northern Ireland that wield the power are possibly guilty of preaching to the choir and, probably worse, listening only to the choir singing and not to the wider congregation?

**Kate Clifford:** It is too easy to blame our politicians. The reality is that, in all that we do in Northern Ireland, we have to find a new way forward. Some of our politicians stir the pot. They stir it very well and very easily. There are people on either side who are willing to be involved in unlawful behaviour. The responsibility very often lies in communities to manage, control and support those people to understand or find new ways to express their anger and concern, which do not always result in violence. I fully believe in the right to protest. I fully believe in people's right to stand up and protest for what they do not believe in, or for what they believe in and what they do not agree with, but I do not believe in



violence. We have to have some way of checking that the default mechanism that we have in Northern Ireland, which is reverting to and threatening violence, has to be moved out of the political arena and out of our community arena.

Q1041 **Mr Goodwill:** Louise Coyle, do you agree with the general feeling that rural women or people generally have not been listened to by everybody who is in a position of power?

**Louise Coyle:** The key to all of this has always been communication and how honest that communication is. Kate and I work together on this all of the time, and indeed with the women who spoke before us. We are still waiting on the full delivery of all strands of the Good Friday agreement. Part of that includes a civic forum—the very thing that would facilitate people who live here to have a voice and to have these difficult conversations. Instead, it is left to the likes of ourselves, with insecure funding. We are not really supported to do this kind of work, but we know that it is so vital that the people who we work on behalf of need this, and they need the space and the expert facilitation. You can see the difference in having someone like Eileen, who has lived through all of this, facilitating a session. She can speak with authority and support people to have these conversations. Those things are vital where we are at.

There has been an awful lot of unhelpful and, on occasion, erroneous communication from almost all political quarters on Brexit, the protocol, a sea border and the social unrest that we saw around Easter. There definitely has not been enough clarity of communication centrally on the protocol in particular. Most citizens have very little understanding of the protocol, yet there is still this pervading narrative in the media, as well as everywhere else, that it can be renegotiated wholesale or dispensed with altogether. All of us sitting in this room today know that it is not as simple as that.

There is an onus on our political representatives to clarify what it is, what function it serves and what can be adjusted within timeframes and within that remit. It needs to be clear, honest and unambiguous and, to date, it has not been any of those things. That negligence of communication has allowed those with other agendas to utilise that lack of existing knowledge that is out there. The protocol has clearly had the result, however unintentionally—and I do believe that it is unintentional—of significant numbers of particularly unionist people feeling that their British identity is being challenged and undermined. That unsettles our whole community. If there is any significant section of our community feeling unsettled, it impacts on all of us. Whether we agree with it or not, it does not matter. It has an impact on us all.

While it was considered by Governments as a trade agreement and a trade border—I totally get why that was the focus for Governments—it is clearly also a constitutional border and a border of identity. Historically, identity has been such a huge issue for us here. It is psychological, but



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no less real and visceral for all of that. The elected representatives who agreed that protocol failed to take the electorate with them on that when they agreed it, telling them it would be fine when, clearly, it is not, and when it is having a negative impact on all of us.

We need to get people at the table. By “people”, I mean all of our people. It should reflect our society. It should reflect the 50% of women and the 40% of rural. It should reflect our society. Of course, one meeting is not going to do that. It is about a series of engagements, by which I mean listening to people but also feeding back. Kate can echo this, I know, because she has been on a lot of these engagements with me around Brexit and the protocol with what we call political actors in these situations. From the engagements that happen, there is precious little feedback and really no structures in place to make that north-south/east-west civic engagement structurally sound or such that it is going somewhere.

The women earlier touched on this. People get fed up going to meetings and telling people the same thing. The issues have not changed greatly these last five years. The issues for women and their concerns around this have not greatly changed. Of course, there are nuances from week to week, but the big-picture issues have, largely, not changed, and yet we get very little feedback on what is being done when people take on board the views. That needs to change fundamentally in terms of how civic society is engaged with.

**Q1042 Mr Campbell:** It is good to see the second panel. On the issue of the impact that the protocol is having, you are all working in rural communities, and there are different views. We have heard about perceptions, views and beliefs, from opposition to moderate support. What has been the practical outcome? Over the past six months, have community relationships and cohesion stayed roughly the same, got a bit worse, much worse or what?

**Charmain Jones:** From the work that I do and the work of other practitioners, there is a general consensus that community relations work has taken a backward step. That has been evident even in terms of online engagement with anything that we would have done at the beginning of the pandemic and now, as we get further towards July. We held a number of temperature checks in March, April, May and June with our 30 practitioners. In the June meeting, there was definitely an overall attitude and fear that community relations work has gone backwards, in terms of not only inter-community relations but intra-community relations as well.

That is something where, as a practitioner, we have to constantly re-energise ourselves. We are the peace-builders and the peacemakers, so we always have to try to look at everything as glass half full, when other people are talking about what is happening in the communities, the discontent, the uncertainty and the fear. As rural workers, and particularly in my job as a community relations worker, it is always about constantly trying to re-energise them and to say, “Yes, in the short term,



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we might have a hot summer—hopefully, we do not—but, in the long term, the peace process is more important”.

I have even found that relationships that would have happened in March or April, in the middle of the second or third lockdown, have taken a backward step in June. We are trying to rethink what we need to be doing within RCN and with all our partners to try to get over this period of July and then take a step forward into August again, and away we go. It is our job as peace-workers to use the right language, attitude and passion to help push the peace process forward, even though we have hit a blip here in the middle of July.

**Louise Coyle:** It is absolutely vital to record that the women where we live have a range of views and perspectives with regard to Brexit, the protocol and all of that. However, I absolutely concur with everything that Charmain said. We sit on that group as well, with the wealth of experience in that room. You are talking about the equivalent of 30 people who are doing the work that Eileen does on the ground, face to face in our communities, and how vulnerable they are feeling with this work right now. It is very challenging.

Before coming to this today, because we are a membership-based organisation, I did say to our members that I was coming to this. We canvass their views all the time on this, but I asked, “Is there anything you want me to make sure I raise on your behalf?” Every single reply that I got was, “We just do not want the protocol to be the reason for the Good Friday agreement to fall”, or for peace to fall. There were several different responses, but the gist of all of them was that people understand.

We are at a critical time. This is the time of year when there is always a bit of tension historically. People in our communities are certainly feeling that, and feeling the fear of that tipping over into something that none of us wants to see. That puts the extra pressure on your question about people who are facilitators and community workers in their areas having to try to ensure that that does not happen. The onus is on all of us. It is on you, me and all of us.

**Kate Clifford:** We did a temperature check and I am just going to read my notes from what came up from that: “Community tensions are high, both intra- and inter-community tension. There is real fear. There is bitterness, resentment and a drift away from a willingness to engage in peace-building work”. This came from people who are working for councils and people who are independent peace-builders working with community organisations. “There is too much misinformation. There is too much sensationalist news-building by poor journalism, which is missing factchecking as a part of its reporting process. Many workers and activists are saying they feel powerless to address the misinformation and the rhetoric, and they are too exhausted by the scale of the task, on top of the ongoing workloads in a post-pandemic culture”.



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Most of our community activists have been working right through the pandemic to be the frontline delivery agents—the last-line delivery—on all of the Covid-related difficulties that there have been in many communities. They have been delivering food parcels, checking on loneliness, isolation and mental health, and peace-building. They have continued with their own workloads as well as doing a full Covid response. They are now coming into a season that is traditionally one where cultural identity becomes front and centre and is celebrated in many communities but causes tension in others. They are now about to engage in that season.

There is another reality from this—and it is brilliant that it came up—from the PUL community in particular, when we did a temperature check with them. There was a conversation about the desire for parades, bonfires and culture expression in this summer in many communities. That is not about anger but about an acceptance that parades and bonfires will be bigger than usual because of Covid, because people want a bit of normality. They have been locked down. They want something to celebrate and they want a reason to meet their neighbours. It is also because this is the centenary year. People are proud of this region and the place that they want to call home, and they want to celebrate that.

The difficulty will be in controlling the protesting elements who will seek to capitalise on those natural gatherings and will bring anger to those celebrations. Lots and lots of parades and bonfires will pass off without incident and without issue, because of the good work being done in various areas by third-sector organisations, but there is no doubt that, in some areas, other elements will exploit the opportunity to make clear points to political parties that they see as being hugely distant from them. These few will make the news, and all the other work being done will be overlooked and downgraded as a result of one or two flashpoints.

**Mr Campbell:** That is one of the most powerful and telling things that I have heard in the session this morning.

**Chair:** I would echo that sentiment.

Q1043 **Fay Jones:** I have been waiting to ask questions, but listening to all of the comments this morning, throughout both of the sessions, they have been answered. I will be selfish and just use my opportunity to say that I represent a very rural area. Brecon and Radnorshire is possibly the most rural constituency in England and Wales, despite what the Chair would like to tell you.

**Chair:** No, I think you are right. Your constituency is bigger than Luxembourg; you have to go a long way to find a constituency bigger than Luxembourg.

Q1044 **Fay Jones:** I do not think I would get very far trying to campaign for Brecon and Radnorshire to re-join the European Union. I just want to use my opportunity to say that what you are doing is incredibly important and to wish you all power to your elbow. In a rural area, even though it looks



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very beautiful, women's points of view are often not heard. I say that as a Member of Parliament. It is important to recognise that misogyny is not always aggression and violence towards women. It is not hearing them or listening to them. We must do everything that we can to hear from people like you. I just want to say thank you very much for speaking up so clearly and powerfully on behalf of rural women. I appreciate it.

**Louise Coyle:** One of our local politics shows that we have here, in the last two consecutive weeks, has had a panel discussing Brexit, the protocol and the issues for this week. In these two weeks, the panels have been exclusively men. That is the picture here. It is almost like, "This is a very important issue, so we need to listen to the very important men who we know have plenty to say about this". You have heard testimony from the fantastic women we have in the north. Women have plenty to say. Rural women have plenty to say and plenty of views. They just do not get the invitations to the spaces and places to platform those views.

The critical part of that is that most women who we meet are solution-focused, no matter what their background is. I have had some communication this week specifically on this meeting, and one of the things that struck me was when someone said, "We cannot go back. We have to find a way to move forward". That is the view that I hear from women. We have to find a way, and we know that those ways are difficult, but we know that women can find them. We are standing on the shoulders of others here. But for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition hiding in the ladies' loos in Stormont and passing Mo Mowlam some text, we would have had nothing, even in the Good Friday agreement, about victims. That continues to be such a huge issue in our politics.

Women are the peace-builders, women are the peace-brokers and women are committed to a future where we can all live safely in the space that we are in—everyone, regardless of their political identity. Whatever it is, women work together.

**Fay Jones:** Absolutely—well said.

**Charmain Jones:** People are asking, "What is the solution? What do we need to do?" I am the only female rural regional community relations officer in Northern Ireland. I can find the people. I use my two ears. I have only one mouth. It is about listening and finding. If you go and actively find people to speak to, and actively listen to those people, they will tell you everything that you need. Rural people are the rural experts.

I live in an urban centre. I am not even from a rural town. If you go and ask rural people what they think and feel around the protocol or any other issue, they will tell you. It is not a very hard thing to do to find people who are not the ones who normally speak the loudest. You go looking for them and you will get them. I have pages and pages of notes of what rural women and rural men have said across Northern Ireland



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around the protocol, and you will find everything and anything from each extreme and the grey bit in the middle.

I would just say that, when people are asking about solutions, it is about active listening and dialogue, but also about giving rural people an opportunity, going out to them, finding them and speaking to them.

Q1045 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Before I ask my questions, I really want to commend what you and the other panellists this morning are doing. You have my utmost respect, so thank you so much. Before I became an MP, I was a community development worker for a rural communities network, so I understand the hugely important work that you are doing and how difficult it is. We also know that, when it comes to poverty, it is women who are always hit the hardest. When it comes to violence and unrest, it is women who are pivotal and have those peace-building skills. You facilitating these voices is triply difficult and triply as important.

A lot of my questions have been answered. Despite the unequivocal evidence around the positive role that women play in peace-building, has the contribution of women to peace-building in Northern Ireland been recognised?

**Louise Coyle:** There are different ways to recognise value. When we go places, people certainly commend us for our work. Generally, they will listen, but there is a lot of back-patting and what-not, rather than much action. We will rarely have a meeting with politicians who disagree with us that things need to happen or to change for women. We get quite a lot of political agreement and we are quite happy to take on and challenge disagreement on the basis of the evidence that we have.

The evidence is overwhelming that women need more where we live. Rachel and Elaine really did cover a lot of the statistical analysis that there is in terms of the socioeconomics and the disproportionate impact of things like Covid on women. In terms of rural, if you are looking at value, what investment does our own Executive put into rural women? I will tell you about our own research. We found that 1.3% of the resourcing that goes to women—and women will tell you that that is not bagfuls of money—goes rural. We are the only regional rural women's network, and we get 13% of the funding that we did in 2007.

When you talk about value and recognition, that sometimes has to be resourced. The work that we do needs to be resourced. Particularly in rural areas, women have relied on funding from the Special EU Programmes Body. In some ways, we have been responsible for letting our own Executive off the hook on that, because the European Union, as part of its remit, recognised that peace-building and relationships are important, and invested in women in leadership and peace-building. You could not say the same for our own Executive.

Q1046 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Before the others come in, my follow-up question was around funding. We know all the work that you do, and I suspect I know



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the answer anyway, but does the women's sector receive adequate funding for the peace-building work that it is carrying out? What do the other witnesses think?

**Kate Clifford:** I am going to come in as the director of a rural regional organisation that supports the infrastructure across Northern Ireland. We receive a pittance. We receive a grand total of £80,000 to £125,000 a year to run an organisation that has six staff. We cover everywhere from Limavady to Kilkeel and from Rathlin to Belcoo. We cover the entire rural region of Northern Ireland and have six members of staff, but we are scrambling for funding year on year. We scramble for investment.

What we do not do is scramble for impact. The impact of the work that we do has been recognised. Charmain is a prize-winning community relations practitioner in Northern Ireland and has been recognised for the significant contribution that she has made to community development here. Louise and I have both been to the UN to speak on issues of rural women and rural peace-building in a post-Brexit society, so we are not short of impact. What we are short of is consistency of funding.

I will tell you, as a director of an organisation that has scrambled year on year with annual budgets, we get our budget issued to us in March every year, which means that each one of our staff are on notice, because there is no longevity and no security of tenure. I have two fantastic daughters who are very socially and politically aware, and I would put neither of them into this sector, because it is absolutely heart-breaking and nerve-racking to be a director in charge of people's resources and families, and manage an organisation on a shoestring budget that does not even cover the basic expenses of what we do.

As I said earlier, for us it is about intentional peace-building. If we are serious about peace-building, we should not be running to the EU, to the Department of Foreign Affairs or elsewhere. We should be funded and resourced by our own Executive to do the work that we do, which is valued by them, to bring peace and stability to this region. That is the work that we do: to bring those voices and to articulate those needs. As I say, we are not short on impact. What we are short on is a consistency of resource that allows us to plan long-term and to do long-term engagement that leads to long-term change that builds trust, capacity and succession-planning, which Eileen so eloquently explained.

Recently, we have engaged with Holywell Trust and Fermanagh Trust as a regional network, to west of the Bann in particular. We have looked at a project that will bring capacity to communities to address the issue of succession-planning, because we recognise that, in the west of rural Northern Ireland, many of the people who we deal with who are managing community groups here are in their sixties. During Covid, a lot of those people had to go to ground, because they had to shield. We recognised immediately that we now have a succession problem in those communities and with the leaders of those communities.



I recognise that I am on Hansard, but I turn 50 next week. I cannot be the youngest female from west of the Bann talking at committee meetings. It is not good enough. Where are the next generation of peace-builders and community development officers? It is just not good enough that we do not have that planning in place. Our Executive needs to invest in that, if it is serious about intentional peace-building and the future of this region, in whatever jurisdiction it sits.

Q1047 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Thanks for that. That is really quite telling. Can you just clarify whether any of the funding comes from the Executive or is it all from charitable sources?

**Kate Clifford:** At the moment, we are funded under the confidence and supply agreement, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Communities, through a thing called the regional infrastructure support programme, of which Louise is funded through the women's sector of the RISP funding. As she said, she gets 1.3% of the total funding for the women's sector in Northern Ireland.

**Charmain Jones:** We are also funded to do our peace-building work by the Community Relations Council. We have been funded by it for about the last 15 years. I have been working for RCN for nearly 11. I am younger than Kate; I am 45, so I can speak with five years' less experience, but it is really important to say that, even though we are funded by the Community Relations Council, for which we are very grateful, it is only a post that it funds. There is no programme money. Every year, RCN, myself and Kate have to try to get a budget behind us. That is where we really are at the forefront of collaborative working.

Last year, Kate and I worked with 42 different organisations across the whole of Northern Ireland, bringing rural and urban together and bringing resourcing to rural areas, which was missing, to try to build that infrastructure of peace-building across rural Northern Ireland. It is about that collaborative working. We do not put our hands around our homework and say, "This is our piece". NIRWN in particular is a great partner of ours, and it is about trying to reach out into the most marginalised rural communities, but using the resources that we have to deliver that work. Some of that funding might be £500 or £1,500, but I am well known for stretching the budget for a couple of years and getting the best out of it. That is just through resourcefulness and using collaboration and partnership-working. That is something that rural should be held up for in terms of the impact, but the resourcing is definitely less.

**Louise Coyle:** Can I just come in and clarify that 1.3%? The 1.3% is for all of rural women, and the RISP budget that we get will be included in that, but we do get more than 1.3% out of that budget. Interestingly, the evaluation of that women's regional infrastructure programme clearly states that there is not a sufficient percentage going to rural to be sustainable for rural delivery. The problem is still the same, but just



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because we are on record, I wanted to be clear about the percentages and numbers.

**Mary Kelly Foy:** That is very worrying, especially in the current climate and given the work that you are doing.

Q1048 **Chair:** In the interests of time, I want to ask two questions. The first one will not require any answer apart from a thumbs-up or the nodding of heads. I think I would be right to say that you would agree that the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 would be enormously helpful. I have a thumbs-up from Ms Coyle.

**Kate Clifford:** Sorry; I missed the question because my internet froze—the joys of rural living.

**Chair:** I was merely assuming or presuming—and there is a danger in doing both—that you would all support the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

**Kate Clifford:** Yes, absolutely.

Q1049 **Chair:** Ms Jones says the same. You have all suggested, in various ways, the polarisation of the debate, with the extreme orange and the extreme green squeezing out the middle. Can I just ask you for a few words as to why you think that has happened and who you believe benefits from echo-chamber politics rather than solution-finding politics?

**Louise Coyle:** I do not have a simple answer for you.

**Chair:** None of us has the answer. If we did, we would all be millionaires.

**Louise Coyle:** That is exactly what I was going to say. If there was a simple answer to that, I would be worth a fortune and would not be looking for funding every year. What I would say is that part of this is historic, of course, with our binary politics. One of our members said to me, “This has just become another thing that we cannot talk about”, because we are very good at taking those very binary, polarised views. Or those people who have more nuanced views do not want to get into the argy-bargy of it all and end up not talking about it at all—“Let us not discuss that as an issue because we want to have a cordial environment”.

I do not want to speak on other people’s behalf, but my view is that part of our remit as leaders in the community sector is to facilitate those conversations that people do not want to have and are nervous about having, and to create safe spaces to have those conversations. We all know that that is not always the big politics focus. The big politics focus is to get their party point of view across. That is the business that they are in, and it is a very different business to the one that we are in.

**Kate Clifford:** It goes back to the perfect storm. The pandemic has created distance between communities, and social media on top of that then creates the echo chambers. If you say you like a particular type of ice cream, all of a sudden you are bombarded with adverts around that



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particular type of ice cream. That is what happens on social media. It is aligned in a way that algorithms enable you to reinforce your views and your thinking, and so the nuance of dialogue has dissipated in the pandemic.

We have political posturing. We have an imbalance in Northern Ireland in terms of our political agendas at present. There is a lot of posturing around the whole talk of a united Ireland at the moment, which is unhelpful in the current circumstances, when there is already instability and insecurity. There is talk about winners and losers. There is very difficult dialogue coming from our political classes. When we have a Secretary of State who stands up and says he is willing to break international law, and we, as peacemakers, are trying to promote an element of lawfulness within communities for whom lawlessness has been a rule of thumb, it is really unhelpful.

People are afraid to stand up and say, "That is not how it is for me" or "That is not how it is for our community". Even coming on this today and being Hansarded and being part of that exposes our belly. We know that we will get a backlash on some of this stuff, and we are not paid enough to get the backlash on this stuff. The reality for many of us is that we live and breathe and work in the communities that we represent. They know who we are and we are very public figures in our own communities.

There is a risk in all that we do, and it is a calculated risk that we take daily in the work that we do. The difficulty for us is when the language of Parliament and the language of Governments is one of brinkmanship and posturing, and that is almost testosterone-driven. That then plays out in our communities, which are uncertain and unsure and whose default mechanism, very often, is a return to the known, which is the status quo, which is violence. That is what happens.

We have to be careful. My plea to everybody on this call and all who are doing the negotiation is that, although it makes great headlines to talk about the "great British banger" and all of that, the reality is that there are lives at stake on the ground in Northern Ireland, and it is not fun.

**Chair:** Kate, thank you. That is a sobering thought.

**Charmain Jones:** Northern Ireland is not a homogenous place and is very diverse. The only point I want to leave you with is not to be afraid of what you are going to hear. If you engage in true dialogue and listen to what people are saying to you, you are going to hear things that you might not agree with or want to agree with, or even things where, as Louise said, silence is golden and they are not to be spoken about.

I am very lucky in the job that I do that people do speak to me about these issues; they are open with me about their fears and concerns and all that Kate has talked about. That is all I have heard for the last six months, with different views on the protocol and a united Ireland, and everything else in between. You might not agree with what you hear, but



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it is important not to be afraid of what you hear and to actively listen to people on the ground. There is a reality versus perceptions, and people are thinking and feeling at the minute that there is confusion and fear, and that it is complex.

As Kate says, nobody I have spoken to wants a return to violence. Everybody wants to live in peace and to find some common ground. That is the piece that I am going to leave you with. We all want the same destination.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. I would like to ask the first panel, who I think are still with us, to turn their cameras back on, if they do not mind, so that we can close the session all together. We have a Committee WhatsApp group, which has been buzzing during this session with what you have had to say, and buzzing in the right way.

At the danger of running the risk of spoiling the party by saying it was all going so very well, I want to take us back to something that Margaret Thatcher said 56 years ago. Mary Kelly Foy is already reaching for the smelling salts as I say this. Mrs Thatcher said, "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman". I am tempted to say that some things never change, but if you wanted an example of that as a political maxim, this morning has illuminated that really clearly. Thank you.

Let me echo what my friend and colleague Fay Jones said, and that Mary said as well. Thank you for what you are doing. It is brave to stand up. It is braver still to speak up. It is brave to speak truth unto power and to try to bring sides together who often believe, from the first moment, that they have nothing in common and, in a conversation, discover that they have lots in common. Thank you for all you are doing. As I say, Eileen, you are not allowed to retire. We are going to clone you or something. We are going to just keep you going with Sanatogen or something else.

Thank you all so much. It has been a marvellous session. It has confirmed in my mind the importance of having more of these types of engagements, and probably in and across Northern Ireland as well, because you have a lot to say, you say it brilliantly and you have given us great food for thought. Thank you again and enjoy the rest of the day.