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ERCA Web event: Rural Health Needs and Collaborative Action for a Resilient Future

Hosted by Rural Community Network, Northern Ireland

31 October 2025 11.00-13.00 CET

Overview

The health system in Northern Ireland is under unprecedented strain, with rural communities facing the sharpest edge of its challenges. From soaring waiting lists and emergency department delays to the closure of local services and a shrinking GP workforce, the current trajectory risks deepening health inequalities and isolating those living outside urban centres. Rural areas are experiencing a critical shortage of GPs, compounded by early retirements and recruitment difficulties. The closure of nearby A&E departments and the centralisation of specialist services—while potentially improving efficiency—often leave rural residents travelling long distances for essential care. Meanwhile, the Community and Voluntary Sector, a lifeline for many, is stretched thin, with volunteer numbers still below pre-pandemic levels. These issues are not just operational—they are structural. The lack of strategic rural-proofing in health reforms has led to reactive changes that fail to consider the unique needs of rural populations. To build a resilient and equitable health system, we must move from crisis management to collaborative planning.

Communities must be empowered to work in partnership with statutory bodies, health professionals, and the voluntary sector to co-design services that reflect local realities. This means:

- **Rural-proofing all health policies and reforms** to ensure they do not inadvertently disadvantage remote areas.
- **Investing in community-led health initiatives** that harness local knowledge and build trust.
- **Supporting and rebuilding the voluntary sector**, recognising its role not as a stopgap but as a strategic partner.
- **Creating sustainable workforce plans** that address GP shortages and incentivise rural practice.
- **Using digital health solutions wisely**, ensuring they complement—not replace—face-to-face care, especially for those with limited connectivity.

The future of rural health depends on inclusive, strategic action. By working together—across sectors and communities—we can create a health system that is not only efficient but also fair, accessible, and rooted in the lived experiences of all who depend on it.

Speakers:

A. State of Healthcare in Northern Ireland – Kate Clifford – CEO Rural Community Network.
B. Healthcare Toolkit and How this is used in communities – TBC – Rowntree Foundation.
C. Consequences for Rural Areas – Karin Kee – Well Care Horizon Project

Break-out Rooms:

- Attendees will be sent to Break-out room to discuss:
    1. What is working well in your country?
    2. What is the impact of relying on volunteers and the C&V sector to deliver healthcare?

Agenda

Attention: Timetable is in Central European Time

10.30 - 10.55	Testing speakers and organization	
11.00 - 11.05	Welcome and Introduction	Vanessa/Tom
11.05 – 11.10	Introduction to the day and speakers	Ben
11.10 -11.25	Presentation: Rural Health Need in Northern Ireland	Kate Clifford –RCN
11.25 – 11.40	Presentation: Changing Landscape for Rural Populations in rural UK and Rural Health Toolkit	Ivan Annibal – Rose Regeneration & National Centre for Rural Health and Care in UK
11.40 – 11.50	Q&A	
11.50 – 12.00	Comment and Input from EU Expert – Well Care Project	Karin Kee
12.00 – 12.30	Break – Out Rooms – Attendees are split into Break-out Rooms	Moderators
12.30 – 12.50	Feedback from Break-out Rooms	Moderators
12.50 – 13.00	Wrap up and Closing Remarks of Webinar	TBC

This is a FREE event but please register via Eventbrite to receive link to join the Webinar.