

UK Government Agriculture Bill

Comments on UK Government Agriculture Bill,
Local Action Groups, Rural Development Programme

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Background information on Local Action Groups

The ten Local Action Groups (also known as the Priority 6 LEADER groups or LAGS) deliver the LEADER Schemes on behalf of DAERA and are made up of local government representatives and social partners.

All ten Local Action Groups are established as independent companies coterminous with 10 of the new Councils and each Council has a Service Level Agreement with DAERA to provide an administration and financial management service to the LAG.

Presently, there are 216 LAG board members across 10 LAGs with 116 Social partners and 100 elected members of Local Government. LAG members have a keen interest in their rural communities, rural development and have invested many thousands of voluntary hours into working alongside the Department in delivering the programme. This has included assessing just over 1400 applications, representation on the NI Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee; LEADER Strategic Forum, Network sub-groups and Oversight committees.

LEADER is the European Community Initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity in their local area. The Leader approach is the delivery mechanism through which £70m has been allocated to the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and which is being spent at a sub-regional level meeting specific needs as identified through strategic objectives as set out in the Local Rural Development Strategy. Included within the £70m LEADER funding is £12.4m for Council administration to support the 10 LAGs across 10 rural Council areas

The aim of the Leader approach is to increase the capacity of local rural community, business networks and local elected representatives together to build knowledge and skills, innovate and co-operate in order to tackle rural development objectives. This approach has been adopted by successive NI governments for over the past 25 years and has been the prime agent in ensuring a thriving and increasingly cohesive rural area.

The LEADER approach adopts and promotes the following general principles:

- Decentralised management and financing;
- Serving a defined rural area;
- Deploying bottom-up approaches;
- Local public-private decision making partnerships (Local Action Groups or “LAGs”);
- Supporting innovative practices;
- Working across sectors in an integrated way;
- Networking;
- Co-operating with other LAGs in NI and/or in EU countries.

Rural Development Schemes

The Schemes currently being delivered within the programme include:

Rural Business Investment Scheme

Support for investments in creation and development of non-agricultural micro and small business activities.

Rural Basic Services Scheme

Support for investments in the setting up, improvement or expansion of local basic services for the rural population including leisure and culture, and related infrastructure.

Rural Broadband Scheme

Support for community lead broadband infrastructure, including its creation, improvement and expansion, passive broadband infrastructure and provision of access to broadband and public e-government

Village Renewal Scheme

Support for drawing up and updating of plans for the development of municipalities and villages in rural areas and their basic services and of protection and management plans relating to Natura 2000 sites

Comments on the UK Government Agriculture Bill

The Local Action Groups welcome this invitation to submit evidence to the Committee on the UK Government Agriculture Bill.

As a result of our experiences, participation and co-operation in successfully delivering a series of Rural Development Programmes across NI since 1992, we believe that there is a need to develop a future Rural Development Programme within a specific framework which meets the needs of the rural population and delivered using a LEADER type approach.

We support the Bill's intention to provide powers to an NI DAERA Minister in relation to agricultural policy and to modify existing EU legislation on rural development. We ask for the record if this would include the delegation of power to include a new Rural Development Programme as an outcome of the new Rural Policy Framework for NI.

The UK Government Agriculture Bill provides an opportunity for devolved government to design and deliver policy and we ask that this should now be prioritised by Minister Poots and the Executive under devolution to develop and implement seamlessly a Rural Development Programme post 2020.

In our view it is vitally important that The NI Executive considers how rural development will be both facilitated and funded post 2020 and Brexit and uses whatever powers contained within the bill to develop such a programme. We would welcome an indicative schedule and timetable on current deliberations

on how rural development policy and delivery will best meet the needs of our rural communities.

It is vitally important that the views of rural stakeholders continue to be considered in this development, as exemplified by the work currently underway by DAERA on a Rural Development Policy Framework. We would welcome further opportunity to cooperate in this valuable work.

It is important also that the Executive requires of the UK government that policy proposals for the shaping of the nature of rural development across the UK be adopted in a timely fashion through delegation of powers under the UK Government Agriculture Bill or alternate mechanisms such as the UKSPF and which should specifically include a Rural Development Funding Programme.

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Rural Development Programme delivery to date 2014-2020:

Some highlights to date:

- 1400 applications have been assessed with some 900 Letters of Offer to the value of £51m issued to a broad range of beneficiaries including Rural Business, Community organisations and Councils.
- Approximately £21m has issued in Letters of Offer for the creation and expansion of rural business and at an intervention rate of 50% at least the same amount has been invested by each business towards plant,

machinery, equipment and capital works contributing to a strong rural economy.

- 174 Letters of Offer worth £15m have been issued to a broad range of Community Organisations for capital works for new builds and refurbishment of community facilities to provide modern facilities for a range of activities for both young and old.
- 122 letters of Offer have issued to the value of just under £14m to Councils to provide for capital works within villages (e.g. Shop Front Schemes, gateway features into villages, environmental improvements, walkways to connect facilities)

Rural Development Programme delivery 2014-2020:

e.g. Mid Ulster LAG

In Mid Ulster alone, there will be a total investment of over £16m generated from a LEADER funding allocation of £8.3m generated from the private, community/voluntary sector and Council.

- 95 rurally based SME's in Mid Ulster have been supported in Mid Ulster under the Rural Business Investment Scheme (RBIS) for business development and expansion activities. This will lead to a total investment within these businesses of £7.2m – this includes £2.82m in grant aid and £4.38m levered from the businesses in receipt of grant aid

- The 95 businesses supported currently employ over 900 employees. Investment generated as a result of RDP assistance will support the creation of just 230 additional new jobs – with 135 created to date.
- Within the community / voluntary sector grant aid of £2.67m has been approved for projects aimed at improving basic services in rural areas of the district. This will generate a total investment of over £6m for the development or improvement of community facilities in rural areas to serve as rural service hubs.
- 52 rural villages will benefit from almost £2.9m of investment in village infrastructure – with Council contributing approximately £750,000 toward this.

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