



**Mourne,
Gullion &
Lecale**

Rural Development
Partnership

10 March 2021

Ms Marion Johnson
Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Room 243,
Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
Stormont,
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Emailed to; Marion.Johnson@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear DAERA Committee,

Re: Future Rural Affairs Policy

On behalf of Mourne, Gullion and Lecale Rural Development Partnership (MGL), I welcome the opportunity to comment on the presentation made to the DAERA committee. MGL acknowledges the work undertaken by DAERA officials, LAG members and Council representatives in the development of the policy strategy and framework to date. Members are supportive of the five pillars identified as underpinning the new policy strategy and framework, which we see as further development of the existing schemes to address the key issues impacting rural people and their communities.

Within the pillar of 'Innovation & Entrepreneurship', MGL welcome the detail around the potential to develop a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship to grow the economy within Newry, Mourne and Down District with the continued aim of enhancing prosperity whilst impacting on creating employment opportunities. MGL are keen to continue to encourage and develop the entrepreneurial spirit that exists amongst our rural communities and this pillar has the potential to do so. Further to this, the impacts the current pandemic have had and will continue to have untold ramifications on the business community and any future interventions must have a sufficient animation element in order to deliver successful outcomes. Flexibility of delivery is essential in this circumstance as businesses begin to emerge from long periods of uncertainty.

MGL are extremely passionate about addressing unemployment across rural communities and fully support any scheme that will impact on this. It is vitally important rural dwellers are appropriately skilled and are provided with the opportunity to develop this further with a view to working towards employment and realising the entrepreneurial spirit that exists

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across the district. At times there can be a number of interventions available at one time, so a collaborative approach across central and local government would work towards greater outputs.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and MGL fully recognise the importance of access to services and opportunities provided by digital infrastructure. Through Priority 6 of the Rural Development Programme we carried out a feasibility study to investigate the connectivity issues across the district. This piece has been since used to inform a number of interventions that are working towards the development of connectivity across all council areas. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council continue to take the lead on the delivery of Full Fibre NI and MGL welcome any further intervention or financial contribution that will have positive impacts in this regard.

Rural transport across the district requires urgent attention. Poor provisions have knock on effects that have impact across all pillars detailed in the framework. Poor rural transport across the rural communities marginalises rural dwellers, encourages isolation, disadvantage, access to services, employment opportunities and education. Access to services is key to those living in rural areas and MGL are keen that interventions are designed to ensure the level of disadvantage that is currently felt across the district is addressed.

Health and well-being is of key importance to MGL and this has been demonstrated through the success of the Village Renewal and Rural Basic Services schemes delivered during the current programming period. These schemes have had significant impacts on well-being and have created a sense of place across the district where a broad range of services can be delivered at a local level by local actors. Significant investment has been made to date with regards to health and well-being and MGL are keen to continue to empower local communities.

MGL very much agree with the comments made by the DAERA committee Chair where he specifically acknowledged the wealth of *'knowledge and experience bases that have been built up through councillors and social partners'* on the LAG's. The success of the LEADER approach (where local representatives make decisions that will impact on the local community) has been particularly successful due to the depth of knowledge coming from a variety of sectors to include community, agriculture, environment, business in cooperation with elected representatives. The level of expertise, coupled with the arrangement with our delivery partners (Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) has proved extremely successful to date and it is important this knowledge and experience is harnessed in any future programme and this also extends to the delivery of any pilot interventions that may be devised.

On behalf of the Local Action Group, I must continue to highlight the continued disadvantage experienced by our rural dwellers and the importance of continued support

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that is required to address the balance and ensure the rural areas are provided with the opportunity to thrive and work towards fulfilling their full potential.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Roisin Mulgrew
Chair of Mourne, Gullion and Lecale Rural Development Partnership

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