

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 13 May 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Covid 19 update

Single Application

- On 30 March 2020, the Minister confirmed that the closing date for the 2020 Single Application would remain as 15 May 2020. Northern Ireland is the only region in the United Kingdom which makes direct payments in October. Any extension to the application period could delay payments in October 2020. However, the period during which farmers can amend claims without penalty has been extended to 09 June 2020.
- To 5 May, over 17,300 had submitted their SAF, over 16% higher than the same period last year.
- DAERA Direct offices are closed to the public. Area-based Schemes Division staff are working from home to provide an enhanced SAF Advisory Service. Action is being taken to give additional staff the ability to work from home to ensure continuity of this service. A service has also been put in place for DAERA staff to submit Single Applications online for applicants who have no broadband or access to I.T. equipment who would have availed of a Digital Assistance appointment in their local DAERA Direct office in the previous scheme year.
- On 4 May, the deadline for the transfer of BPS entitlements expired. By that stage, 5,994 entitlements transfers had been completed, compared to 4,745 in 2019. Farmers were able to submit applications to DAERA staff over the telephone and no difficulties have been reported.
- A derogation has been announced to remove the Greening crop diversification requirement for 2020 because of adverse weather conditions earlier in the year. This is in line with action taken by England, Scotland and Wales. Other Greening requirements remain.
- The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will provide for this derogation. They will be made under the confirmatory procedure and, subject to the necessary clearances, the intention is for them to be considered by the Committee on 14 May and by the Assembly on 19 May.
- All inspections have been paused until at least mid-May. Consideration is being given to how these can begin again on a phased basis whilst minimising any potential risk to staff or customers.
- The fourth Tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher level, opened for applications on 24 April 2020 for 3 weeks. Some 283 applications had been received by 6 May. The application window will close on the 15 May.
- The Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS), the DAERA farm mapping system, continues to be updated as normal and changes requested by farmers are being applied to facilitate more accurate claims.

Covid 19 – Current key issues for Agri-food sector

1. While supply chains are still working effectively there still remains concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus remains within workforce.

Position –NIFDA estimate output from the sector remains at around 100% of meeting demand with levels of absenteeism reported as having reduced to 6.6% on average (6/5/20) from a high of 14% (3/4/20). Following commencement of this testing programme for key workers in agri-food, it has been used by staff within the meat and dairy processing sectors and is working well. Results are available within 24 hours which has been helpful in providing reassurance to the workforce.

2. Agriculture price fall or product flow disruption - Large and sudden fall in incomes is a significant threat to otherwise viable farm businesses. Farm incomes could fall due to covid-19 related fall in market prices, or if farmers can't get product to market or can't get feed, and animals have to be culled for welfare purposes. No problems with flow of product from or to (non-horticultural) farms has arisen yet. The most likely source of disruption to flow of produce from farms is food processing production lines having to close due to high levels of absenteeism. This risk seems to be abating. Industry representatives have raised concerns that a further fall in beef price may be on the way. The latest market statistics shows beef prices had been stable since the beginning of the year but started to fall seven weeks ago with prime cattle now down 15p/kg (4%) and cull cows down 19p/kg (8%). Lamb prices fell by 40p/kg (%) six weeks ago but have since recovered to prior levels. The latest GDT auction (5 May) for milk products showed a decline of 0.8% from the previous auction (cheddar down 6.8%, butter down 5.8%). There are concerns over future NI milk prices but currently no reports of any disruptions to milk collections from NI farms. Lakeland dairies has announced a base price of 23.75p/litre for March Milk (down 1.5p/litre on February) and Dale Farm announced (24/04/20) a 1p/litre price drop for March milk. Other processors that have announced price drops for March milk include Glanbia Ireland (2 cent/litre for ROI farmers) and Aurivo (1.25p/litre for NI farmers).

Position – DAERA is continuing to monitor market conditions, liaise with DEFRA and other DA's, and work is ongoing to develop support schemes for farmers if significant problems materialise.

3. Financial pressures are increasing across supply chains as markets adapt to the changing trading environment. For example, loss of food service markets, certain export markets, reduced productivity in processing plants and increases in some input costs like animal feed. Industry has called for financial support measures and Government have made available grants, rates relief, and loans.

Position – DAERA continues to work closely with industry and banks to assess the potential impacts on the supply chain, to keep products moving where possible and to explore mitigation measures where this is not possible.

4. While supply chains have been functioning, there remains the potential for a build-up of livestock on farms (particularly in the intensive sectors) and or products e.g. milk. A combination of reduced processing speed (due to implementing social distancing measures in plants), lack of market outlets (including for animal by products) and lack of storage availability for finished product means that pressure could be put back on farms to hold stock and/ or dump product.

Position – DAERA are alive to all the issues and are in regular contact with industry representatives and with DEFRA and the other Devolved Administrations to assess risks and explore options.

5. Many horticulture businesses producing and selling spring bedding plants, cut flowers and ornamentals rely on sales at this time of year through Garden Centres, DIY stores and other outlets that are currently closed. There is a narrow window for sales and a short shelf life for the product with 60% of annual sales occurring in spring. These businesses face huge financial loss.

Position - Minister Poots has asked for Executive colleagues to consider how sales of such produce could be facilitated, specifically raising the issue of Garden Centres re-opening and continues to press for this as part of any relaxation of the lockdown. He has suggested that the re-opening garden centres could be part of a graduated response if they can implement the social distancing measures. This would not only contribute to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the population but also save many otherwise viable businesses. DAERA is exploring what support can be provided to the ornamental horticulture sector.

6. As with private sector workers, there is concern that a shortage of workers in key roles within Government/Agencies with statutory inspection roles to protect public health, could lead to a slow down or halt in processing capacity. This would limit not only the amount of product available but also have knock on effects at farm level.

Position – DAERA are reprioritising workstreams in light of the pressures created by Covid 19 to maintain key services.

7. NI livestock markets took the decision to shut voluntarily (initially for 2 weeks) in an attempt to raise the importance of social distancing among farmers. This followed continued high numbers of farmers attending markets despite warnings and pleas from farming unions. Other means of sale have been explored including virtual sales, buyer only markets and specialist sales.

Position - Livestock Marts closed voluntarily on the 23 March 2020 in response to covid-19 health and safety concerns. DAERA Officials have maintained regular contact with Livestock Mart operators and have been reassured that robust operational protocols, developed by the marts in conjunction with other stakeholders, including the Health and Safety Executive NI, will enable them to conduct business in a manner that is safe for staff, farmers and buyers and adheres to social distancing requirements. At 6 May 2020, 22 livestock markets have recommenced sales, implementing the new protocols. Video technology has been used at a number of mart venues over past weeks and this will continue to be used. Industry feedback on the use of this technology has been positive.

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

- Education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are continuing with remote delivery of learning materials and currently students are in the process of completing their studies and online assessments / examinations. During the COVID-19 restrictions college lecturing staff have been actively engaging with students to ensure the academic year is completed and students achieve their qualifications.
- CAFRE Knowledge Advisory Service Advisers and Technologists are available to provide advisory support to the Northern Ireland Agri-Food industry to assist farmers and food businesses with technical, business and environmental advice during the COVID-19 crisis. Technical articles, videos and webinars have been made available online and promoted through social media channels to support those sectors of the agri-food industry most impacted by COVID-19.
- The European Innovation Partnership (EIP) scheme, which aims to support a collaborative approach between farmers, researchers, advisers and industry representative organisations to drive forward innovation uptake on-farm, received 34 applications. Following verification, the successful applicants will be invited to submit a detailed project proposal by 28 August 2020.
- CAFRE's residential facilities continue to be used by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with health workers using Enniskillen and Greenmount Campuses for overnight accommodation.

- CAFRE have made available over 20,000 coveralls and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the Health and Social Care Trusts and colleagues in Veterinary Service Animal Health Group.

Rural Development Programme

- The European Commission has issued advice regarding how measures within Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) could be utilised to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19. Flexibilities around controls, administrative tasks and where certain commitments cannot be fulfilled due to exceptional circumstances or force majeure have also been introduced. Scheme Managers are currently considering the guidance and are seeking to be as flexible as possible where Covid-19 has had an impact, in line with Commission advice.
- A recent proposal has issued including provision for lump sum payments of up to €5k for farmers and up to €50k for SMEs. This proposal, which involves reallocating some unspent funds, has not yet been agreed by the European Commission. However, the contribution from EU funds is limited to 1% of EAFRD funds, which to NI equates to only €2.3m. My officials are following developments on the proposal closely.
- Welcome news is that it has recently been confirmed that commitments under the current programme can continue beyond the end of this year. The revised commitment date will ensure that commitments under the NIRDP will continue into 2021 and beyond. This may help alleviate pressure in areas impacted due to Covid-19 scheme delays.

Update on Relaxation of UK Competition Law (Dairy Produce)

- The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has temporarily relaxed elements of UK competition law for the dairy sector through the Competition Act 1998 (Dairy Produce) (Coronavirus) (Public Policy Exclusion) Order 2020, which was laid on 1 May 2020 and applies retrospectively from 1 April 2020. The legislation permits dairy producers, processors and logistics providers to: enter into agreements to share information on day to day surplus milk quantities, stock levels, customer demand, and the availability of processing, storage and drying capacity; coordinate the sharing of labour, facilities and transport; coordinate the processing and storage of surplus milk; share information on best practices in relation to surplus milk disposal and the impact of disposal; and coordinate as regards to the temporary reduction of milk production. This derogation from UK competition law does not relate to the sharing of any information relating to costs or pricing. In Northern Ireland, the local dairy processing sector is more highly integrated, with the 3 main milk processors responsible for 90% of locally produced milk. Therefore there may be little uptake of the temporary relaxation here. At present, there are no reports of milk not being collected in Northern Ireland and local industry has indicated that there is currently sufficient storage capacity.

COVID-19 European Commission support for the agri-food sector

- The European Commission has published a series of Regulations necessary to open Private Storage Aid (PSA) schemes in the dairy and meat sectors. The Department will provide a separate written update.

Covid 19 update

Delivery of Official Controls

- The delivery of official controls, that is, ante mortem and post mortem inspections, verification of food business operators' compliance with hygiene, animal health and welfare requirements continues in all slaughterhouses. All slaughterhouse establishments are working normally.
- Essential food and feed inspections are continuing. These include inspections of raw drinking milk facilities and the sampling of raw milk and eggs for the National Residue Control Plan.
- While routine food and feed inspections have paused, work is ongoing to recommence sampling work and to explore alternative methods to deliver checks on compliance with legislation in consultation with Industry and the FSA NI.
- **Current Position**
- In relation to the delivery of poultry ante-mortem inspections in abattoirs, the recently introduced flexibility to conduct ante-mortem inspections on a representative sample of a flock has been suspended. In agreement with food business operators, poultry ante mortem inspections will now be conducted on 100% of every consignment received.
- With effect from 4th May 2020 and in accordance with COVID-19 guidance, risk based sampling of third country imports of feed ingredients for undesirable substances has recommenced. The samples, which are taken at points of entry to Northern Ireland and at inland stores, are sent for a range of analyses.
- A number of alternative remote methods for checking the accuracy of beef carcass classification are being taken forward in consultation with Industry. Risk-based remote inspection methods are also being deployed for follow-up farm dairy hygiene controls.
- Agri-Food Inspection Branch (AfIB) are putting procedures in place for the necessary inspection and sampling work that may arise from applications to the EU Private Storage Aid Scheme which opened on 7th May 2020.

Bovine TB Programme

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the Minister has moved to introduce revised temporary measures for bovine TB (bTB) testing, based upon the principles that testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances and on the primacy of public health requirements.
- The new measures are designed to safeguard the health and well-being of farmers, veterinary practitioners and staff, maintain animal and public health controls and ease the burden on farmers. The changes include:
 - An extension of the grace period before herd restrictions are imposed from 7 days after a test becomes overdue to 35 days;
 - An undertaking that herd-keepers will not be referred to the paying agency for overdue bTB tests if they and/or their Private Veterinary Practitioner (PVP) advise DAERA that the test could not be completed during the testing window for reasons associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

- A temporary exemption from herd tests for calves under 180 days of age where their handling prevents social distancing.
- A number of temporary additional measures to ease cattle movement and testing controls have also been introduced:
 - Herds restricted for overdue tests will be allowed to purchase in cattle;
 - Herds will not be automatically associated when cattle are permitted to move on welfare grounds, from one TB restricted herd to another restricted herd;
 - The requirement for herds, that haven't been tested for 15 months, to complete two herd tests before regaining officially tuberculosis free (OTF) status is being withdrawn as a temporary measure;
 - When a veterinary practice is not carrying out any bTB tests, the farmer can contact their local Divisional Veterinary Office (DVO) to request a change of veterinarian. When the DVO confirms the situation with the veterinary practice, the test can be re-assigned to the DVO or another practice; and
 - The number of TB letters sent to farmers will be reduced by streamlining the current communications.
- **Current Position**
 - The implementation of the revised temporary measures remains under review.

Trade Export Certification

- Trade Programme officials continue to work with UK government – Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) on the development of contingency plans for third country export certification to streamline the process and facilitate remote working. As these arrangements require bilateral negotiations with many third countries, this area of work is both sensitive and challenging.
- A number of easements in relation to export health certificates for exports of live animals and products of animal origin have been implemented for exports to Australia, Gibraltar and the United States of America. Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.
- **Current Position**
- From 13th May 2020, exports of all commodities from the United Kingdom (UK) to China will be accepted on the basis of an Export Health Certificate (EHC) issued on white paper in lieu of Crown Vellum paper.
- The UK is one of the first countries to be given access to China's digital e-certification platform. DAERA officials will upload a scanned copy of the issued export health certificate (EHC) directly into the e-system, in advance of the arrival of the consignment. Import officials in China will use the digitally transmitted copy of the EHC to verify the white paper original EHC on arrival of the consignment in China.

Disposal of Animal By-Products

- In the event of significant disruption to current rendering capacity for the disposal of animal by products, contingency plans have been developed. Officials continue to engage with industry and NIEA to monitor the situation.

Animal Welfare

- On 4/5/20, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) launched a £14 million scheme to support zoo establishments in England during the COVID-19 pandemic. The allocated funding is to be used for the purposes of looking after animals in the zoo establishments rather than to protect the commercial business interests of zoo licence holders.
- The Department expects the Northern Ireland Executive to be allocated a corresponding amount of resource by Treasury in line with the Barnett formula. In accordance with established protocols, it will not be ring-fenced for specific purposes. Work is ongoing to establish whether or not there is a need for an equivalent scheme in Northern Ireland.

Update on Essential Legislation

- Work on essential legislation continues but at a slower pace given the diversion of resource to COVID related work. This diversion, alongside the potential for additional COVID related absences, means that there is a risk that legislation may not be completed within the required timescales and/or to standard.

Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

FISHERIES UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Fisheries - Sea Fishing Sector

- On 3 April 2020 the Minister announced that the Department would proceed with a scheme of financial support for the sea fish catching sector.
- This required secondary legislation made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The Statutory Rule was made and laid at the Assembly on Monday 4 May 2020 and came into operation on 5 May 2020. The Scheme is known as the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (NI) 2020.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 153 vessel owners on 22 April and 82 letters of ineligibility were issued on 23 April to the remaining active vessel owners. To date, 140 applications have been returned and 39 appeals have also been received. The process of sending out Letters of Offer and claim forms commenced on 5 May 2020 and 131 have issued to date.
- Some vessels continue to fish where there is a market for the catch but overall activity is greatly reduced due to the market collapse for fish.

Aquaculture Sector

- There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products as a result of COVID-19. A submission, outlining the delivery mechanism alongside a preferred option for support to the aquaculture industry, has recently been forwarded to the Minister for consideration.
- As a result of the drop in sales, increased stocking densities may increase welfare and disease issues. The Department continues to engage with the sector on this matter.

Public Angling Estate

- Since the Covid emergency began fishing at the public angling estate waters has been closed for public safety reasons and anglers were advised to stay at home. These sites have, however, remained open for pedestrian access throughout this period. This is a live issue and remains under consideration by the Executive and the Minister.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- No update to report, position remains as below.
- The Minister laid the Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Fisheries Bill in the Business Office on 23 March 2020. No date has been scheduled for its Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly.
- The dates for the Report Stage and Final Reading for the Fisheries Bill at Westminster have not yet been scheduled. The latest indicative timings from DEFRA suggest that the Bill will have its final reading in the House of Lords in early June 2020. It is hoped that the Bill will have its first reading in the House of Commons before the summer recess.
- Should Report Stage be delayed due to COVID-19/longer recess period (note: this has not been confirmed), this could impact on the timing of the Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Nothing new to report.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

Covid 19 update

Waste Management Collection, Storage and Processing

- DAERA continues to deliver the key public health and environmental protection messages around waste management during the pandemic including bin hygiene, respect for key workers, the importance of recycling and warning against fly-tipping.
- A mini-campaign was devised alongside the DAERA Press Office to draw attention to the problem of littering, particularly the increased levels of littered PPE. This has been well received

and attracted attention from local councils and the public. This campaign will continue over the next few weeks.

- This week (w/c 11 May 2020) there are 24 household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) open; namely Mid East Antrim Borough Council has all 5 reopened; Causeway Coast & Glens has reopened all 11; Antrim and Newtownabbey has reopened 5 and Lisburn & Castlereagh has reopened 3 of its HWRCs. No negative issues reported from any of those HWRCs which have reopened. All are accepting residual black bin waste with some accepting garden waste and other recyclable materials. Also Derry City and Strabane District Council has set-up a waste hotline and has resumed bulky waste collections.
- HWRC guidance has been updated and published and is available to view at: https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Updated%20Covid-19%20Principles%20and%20Guidance%20for%20Waste%20Management%20Services_0.pdf
- Regulatory Position Statements (RPS) are designed to ensure continued protection of human health and the environment whilst assisting key industries, such as the waste and wastewater industries, to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic period. These statements are available to download at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/waste-regulations-temporary-covid-19-waste-regulatory-positions>
- The Department of Infrastructure's Chief Planner has published the May 2020 update which includes a short article on the NIEA's new Covid Regulatory Position statements promoting a consistent approach in dealing with the waste industry, particularly where waste management licence/permit conditions are common to, or derived from planning permissions. See <https://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/advice/cpu6-may2020.pdf>
- The WRAP NI Covid-19 communications strategy is ongoing. A positive response has been received for the radio adverts and the social media assets, with high levels of engagement from the public. The leaflets will be delivered to households this week (w/c 11 May).
- DAERA is also continuing engagement at the UK four nations level across the range of waste management activities, including waste transfer and transport, processing and disposal.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NI Water's ongoing provision of safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment continues to be prioritised and regulated by NIEA and its Drinking Water Inspectorate.
- NI Water continues to maintain the required drinking water standards and wastewater discharge standards. It has implemented its major incident plan and Analytical Services Contingency Plan to manage its resources. Whilst some monitoring requirements have been relaxed to protect NI Water staff and ensure social distancing, the regulatory standards have not at all changed.
- Commercial (e.g. food producers) and public buildings (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes and hotels housing NHS staff) that use a private water supply continue to be regulated using a risk based approach and ongoing contact with the Drinking Water Inspectorate in the absence of monitoring due to social distancing restrictions.
- A small number of reports have been received by the Drinking Water Inspectorate relating to private water supplies serving individual, domestic properties running dry due to the prolonged dry weather. The current COVID-19 situation has exacerbated the impact, as these are in

isolated rural areas and the occupants are self-isolating or in a shielded group and do not have support to obtain water from other sources. DWI have worked with health professionals, and local council Environmental Health Departments to establish the vulnerability and health based needs of individual cases. DWI liaised with NI Water to reach agreement that NI Water would provide bottled water where a private water supply has run dry and health based need or vulnerable individual has been identified.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- The Department has continued to engage with eNGOs regarding the impact of the COVID-19 and a further meeting between eNGO representatives and senior officials has been held.
- The Department is continuing to explore options regarding how best to use the Departments Environment Fund to support the sector with the delivery of natural environment priorities. This has included introducing flexibilities to the 2020/21 Strategic Environment Fund to take account of the impact of Covid on eNGOs and their project finances and deliverables.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- At the beginning of the Covid emergency NIEA visitor centres, cafes, mobile concessions and public toilet facilities were closed and, where possible, vehicle access to sites was also closed. This is a live issue which remains under consideration by the Executive and our Minister.
- The recent NIEA survey seeking information from other key stakeholders will help inform the partial and complete re-opening of outdoor recreation properties such as parks, nature reserves and walking routes. This survey highlighted 3 key issues:
 - i. A desire from stakeholders to have sufficient number of sites opening on day 1 so that there is not a massive influx of visitors to a small number of sites which cannot be adequately accommodated in line with distancing and other requirements;
 - ii. A sufficient lead in time would be required to enable co-ordinated opening across a number of sites; and
 - iii. a need for joined up messaging regarding opening of sites.
- Meetings with stakeholders to further consider these issues have been arranged.

Air Quality

- Levels of nitrogen dioxide remain lower in 2020 than the average for the preceding five years. This is most likely due to weather conditions (strong winds dispersing the pollutant), and not necessarily a reduction in emissions at source. However, levels had been reducing a little more steeply following lockdown, but the rate of decrease of nitrogen dioxide is now levelling off.
- Weekly figures show considerable variation in levels of particulate matter since lockdown. The 2020 level has exceeded the five year annual mean for a significant number of weeks since lockdown and levels of particulate matter rose in the week commencing 27 April 2020.
- Official continue to monitor levels on a daily basis and will issue an air pollution alert if necessary.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- Westminster Committee Stage remains suspended until further notice. Parliamentary authorities continue to seek solutions to the practical difficulties created by the introduction of necessary social distancing measures.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- The Department, with agreement from the Department for Communities, will take forward the bid for additional Council waste management costs resulting from COVID-19.
- Following further dialogue with the councils and other stakeholders, the original waste bid to the Department of Finance (c£16m) has been reduced (to £5m) due to a reduced impact on services compared to that initially predicted at the start of the crisis.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

Covid 19 update

Covid 19 update Rural Affairs Division

Following the meeting of the AERA Committee meeting on 19th March the Committee asked for further briefing on the Rural Affairs remit. The information below sets out activity across Rural Affairs to ensure safety of staff, continuity of activity across existing Rural Development Programmes; refocusing of rural community supported activity towards Covid response; and, actions to protect customers and staff across the DAERA Direct network of 12 Offices.

RURAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

- Officials continue to monitor the COVID-19 Crisis situation closely. This is a very fluid situation and responses set out below are subject to change at short notice depending on the latest guidance from Government.
- Rural Affairs Division continues to work with a range of statutory and community and voluntary sector partners to provide support to rural communities and rural businesses. This support is primarily channelled through the EU 'LEADER' and Tourism programmes and the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme.
- Rural Affairs have taken the following general actions to respond to the impact of Covid 19 over the last 3 weeks:
 - a. Engaged with project partners to identify solutions to project delivery challenges and provide flexibility and guidance around operating rules where possible to maintain and sustain investment;
 - b. Redirected resources to project payments across EU LEADER, TOURISM and TRPSI schemes to ensure payment of funds to private businesses and community and voluntary sector projects and organisations;
 - c. Worked with Central and Local Government, statutory organisations and community and voluntary partners to identify issues, share information, and offer support; and,

- d. Continued to prepare the draft Rural Policy Framework and consider emerging actions that could be brought forward as pilot projects in the Autumn that would assist rural businesses and communities recover.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

Rural Affairs continues to focus on payments processing and supporting partners. Work continues on the draft Rural Policy Framework.

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

- On 26 March 2020, the Minister increased the measures in place to protect citizens and staff by ceasing all public facing direct services offered by DAERA Direct Offices.
- All customers must now conduct their business through DAERA Online services or, if appropriate, via the Cattle Registration Telephony line (0300 200 7855).
- Documents can still be delivered to a DAERA Direct office and left in a designated post box at the entrance to the building. To ensure protection of the food supply chain, current certification arrangements will continue to apply until further notice.
- Digital Assistance with applications to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) can be accessed through the SAF Advisory Service on 0300 200 7848.
- General queries can be raised directly with the local DAERA Direct office on 0300 200 7840.
- DAERA Direct offices continue to be manned by the minimal number of staff, social distancing is being enforced, and appropriate safety measures are in place to carry out high priority work in relation to maintaining the NI food chain.
- Arrangements are being made to allow some staff to carry out their duties at home, where possible and a number of laptops have been secured to facilitate this.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

Staff continue to work in the DAERA Direct offices on essential services whilst maintaining social distancing. Arrangements to allow more personnel to work from home with laptops and other mobile devices are progressing well.

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

- Through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme, DAERA are working in partnership to deliver a range of initiatives that can help to tackle rural poverty and social isolation. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus the emphasis for a number of these initiatives has changed to ensure best practices are implemented to ensure vulnerable rural people can be assisted in this time of need.
- The TRPSI funded initiatives detailed below have over the past few days refocused their attention to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers in the following ways:

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. The DAERA Minister agreed to contribute £200k to the CFNI Coronavirus Community Fund with provision also made to fund those applications that are deemed ineligible by CFNI on the basis that the applicant organisation have the advancement of religion noted in their constitution. To date, 114 rural organisations have been supported in total with £297,633 awarded. 74 of these have been funded from DAERA’s contribution. Also, 9 organisations deemed ineligible by CFNI have now be grant aided through a partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network, receiving £27,645 in total, an average of £3,071.

Rural Support

- Rural Support staff are continuing to deal with calls to their helpline, which have steadily increased over the period of the Coronavirus. Rural Support sent text messages out to all 9,000 Ulster Farmers Union members last week advising of their services and this has resulted in an influx of calls. The majority of the calls are from people who have concerns regarding the following issues:-
 - Worried about benefits
 - Concerned about their mental health
 - Farming related matters – possible slowdown in the supply chain, the movement of stock and the discontinuation of TB testing
 - Older children moving back home - increase in daily running costs - food electric etc
 - Fearful of the Coronavirus and the impact that their death may have on the farm

- Rural Support mentors continue their role in providing support to clients via phone and on-line and using a comprehensive Coronavirus fact sheet for their team which can be utilized when providing advice to clients.

- Rural Support have also developed an ‘Across the Hedgerow’ initiative with the Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster. This initiative sees the YFC members making daily / weekly linkages with the farming community and in particular the most isolated.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

Rural Support continue to deal with calls and offer support. An on-line resources hub is currently being developed for the farming community and sectors that support the community.

Current callers are 60% male and 40% female, mainly in the 35 – 55 year old bracket with some coming in from the 70+ relating to CoVid19 rather than direct farm related issues. A comparison of number of people calling the Rural Support Helpline in early 2019 and 2020 is provided below. Rural Support are currently adequately resourced to deal with this increase and DAERA officials continue to liaise with them on a very regular basis.

	2019	2020
Jan	39	68
Feb	31	34
March	33	85
April	34	128

Role of Rural Community Transport Partnership (RCTP’s)

- Through the TRPSI Programme, DAERA officials have been working in conjunction with DfI and the RCTP’s to develop a comprehensive list of the activities that RCTP’s will now

undertake in their local areas. Establishing maximum effectiveness for the resource available to the RCTP's (100 vehicles) has been concluded. A comprehensive overview of what services the RCTP's can now provide has been collated and shared with the recently established Council / Trust Emergency Hubs. The RCTP's staff have also commenced calling their 5,000 membership (mainly elderly and disabled isolated rural dwellers) on a regular basis.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

The DAERA and DfI Ministers, in a joint Press Release confirmed their Departments partnership arrangements to agree for the RCTP's to play a key role, working in tandem with local Councils and Health Trusts, in delivering services to rural dwellers. This is proving to be a very effective partnership approach to delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable rural dwellers. To date over 3,000 food parcels have been delivered by the local Rural Community Transport Operators.

SPRING Social Prescribing Project

- Following government guidance, advising social distancing and isolation, all Social Prescribers have suspended client visits. SPRING staff have developed a new delivery model called the "Connect Well Service" to ensure all clients, previously referred, continue to feel connected and supported at this time. The project has therefore moved to a service where Social Prescribers will contact all clients remotely, by telephone, text, social media platforms or through video link. This will benefit 530 vulnerable rural dwellers and 1,800 clients in total.

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UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

To date 795 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 128 of these people have received other forms of support such as food, medicines etc.

Rural Community Development Support Service

- Rural Community Development Support Service Programme (RCDSSP) funded by DAERA works across the 10 'rural' District Council areas in Northern Ireland rural areas so that it can help rural communities identify and address their social and economic needs.
- With access to 1,500 member groups, the 6 Rural Support Networks (RSNs) delivering the service is playing a pivotal role in assisting Councils and Trusts with the task of identifying those vulnerable rural residents who will be in need of assistance and co-ordinating the community response to ensure that it is delivered in a structured way. RSN's have provided detailed lists of the many Community Response organisations across NI to the Councils / Trusts Emergency Hubs. They are also available to assist other Departments and agencies with the important task of circulation of advice and guidance to voluntary sector groups as required.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

The Rural Support Networks have been identified as delivery partners by Councils and all are involved in the community response. DAERA officials meet with the Rural Support Networks on a weekly basis to provide support and advice.

Rural Community Network (RCN) and NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

- Both RCN and NIRWN are currently supported under the joint DfC/DAERA Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP). Officials have worked closely with DfC to ensure that programme flexibilities have been implemented and funding continues to be provided to both organisations to ensure they have the capacity to support rural communities at this time.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

No change

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

LEADER

- DAERA has provided advice to all Councils responsible for administrating the delivery on the EU 'LEADER' Programme 2014-2020 to protect and support Council staff and LAG Board members whilst continuing to provide a service to the public. Easements in procedures and processes from application to Letter of Offer and in claim processing continue to be applied so that project promoters can continue to be reimbursed in a timely manner.
- In line with the requirements of the Public Health Protection (Coronavirus, Protection) Regs (NI) 2020 all council staff involved in the administration of LEADER are working remotely (at home) and site visits to projects by Council staff and DAERA staff have been suspended until further notice. LAG Assessment Panels and LAG Board meetings have been suspended but may be conducted via on line social media platforms, video conferencing or by written procedure.
- Councils advise that there will be delays in delivery for the Rural Business Scheme, Basic Services Scheme, Village Renewal Scheme and Co-Operation Scheme where contractors have suspended work due to the current situation.
- DAERA continues to work closely with LAGs and Councils to maintain a flexible approach which will facilitate the utilisation of all budget allocations before the programme end.
- DAERA regularly liaises with Councils involved in the Rural Development Programme 2014-20 Rural Tourism Scheme. As work has been suspended on construction sites there will be delays in progressing tourism projects. DAERA is working with Councils to provide advice and guidance at this time. £164k has been processed for payment in the last two weeks, with a further £497k pending.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

RAD continue to monitor progress on the LEADER and Tourism measures. Issues on access for projects remain as previously advised.

Payments continue to be processed using the easements granted by the EU Commission.

The deadline for commitments (ie Letters of Offer) was the 31 December 2020. The Commission has now confirmed that commitments can be made under the 2014-2020 NI RDP until 2023 and will be eligible for payment up until the end of 2023 or until the EU allocation is used up (whichever is earlier). The Department will use this change from the Commission to ensure maximum benefit to rural communities.

DfE has established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group to now put in place the structures that will help support recovery and prepare the industry to respond when consumer demand ultimately returns. Tourism NI has also established a Working Group in support of this work. Both Groups will have representation from the Department.

PROJECT STRATUM

- Indications are that the bidders are continuing to prepare their responses to the Invitation to tender and Project Stratum/access to broadband continues to be viewed as a priority by DfE.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

DfE lead on Project Stratum. The tender closed on 5 May 2020. The bids will be technically appraised and assessed. The project is still on target to issue a contract this financial year.

PROCESSING OF GRANT AID CLAIMS

- In line with UK Government and Assembly messaging, staff have designated the payment of claims to project promoters as essential business and have worked tirelessly over the past 3 weeks to put in place new systems to service customers and to process payments. This has resulted in circa £1.7m of payments to LEADER businesses, community organisations and councils being authorised as well as almost £500k to Tourism projects in the last 2 weeks. In the same time period 46 small rural businesses received payment totalling over £150k while 90 applicants to the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme received payments totalling £112k from the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

RAD continue to process claims and make payments relating to TRPSI and LEADER. Some 110 Rural Business Development Grant Scheme claims have been paid up to a value of £361k and 283 Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme claims have been paid up to a value of £358k. A further £200k to Tourism projects has also been made.

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

- Officials have been working on a draft Rural Policy Framework and continue to do so. Although the public consultation will be delayed until the Autumn due to Covid 19, officials are considering the evidence and need identified by stakeholders to date with a view to bringing forward pilot actions in the Autumn that would address that need and could contribute to the Covid recovery.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

Work continues on a draft Rural Policy Framework. We intend to go to consultation later this year.

UPDATE ON ESSENTIAL FINANCE OR BUDGET INFORMATION

- Rural Affairs continue to manage its current budget but expects there to be delays in project completion, due to the Covid 19 restrictions and impact. A large accrual will be brought forward from the 2019/2020 year. Payments to promoters and groups continue where possible subject to the easements given to delivery agents.

UPDATE POSITION 11/05/2020

The impact on the Budget continues to be monitored.

Forest Service – Covid-19 Update

Forest Parks

Forest and Country Parks are open to local communities for pedestrian access to a spacious environment to exercise in compliance with regulations and public health advice on social distancing. We are looking at opportunities to reopen the car parks at our forests and country parks to extend the provision of open space to more people in a measured way. In consideration of this we will be taking account of what facilities can be made available and managed in line with the guidance and for the safety of visiting public, our staff and operating partners.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

Update on IT/People

- An additional 317 laptops were issued to DAERA staff last week. A total of 1,266 laptops, 276 desktops and 151 iPads have been distributed since 23rd March. These additional devices mean that over 2,800 staff can now access the network. The Department has successfully achieved its target to equip 2,500 staff to work from home by mid-May 2020. A further 400 laptops are being prepared for distribution over the coming weeks.

Update on Food Supply Security

- On the 1 May 2020 The NI Executive appointed DAERA as lead for Northern Ireland's Food Supply Security. An action plan outlining its approach is being developed and will be cross-cutting with a number of other Departments.
- DAERA is also developing a draft Food Observatory Report that will allow us to continuously assess the health of the food supply system, with a view to encouraging and supporting measures to maintain its flexibility and resilience.

Update on Communications/Engagement/Staff Well Being

- The Covid-19 communications team continues to co-ordinate communications and information flow for staff and stakeholders via a range of media. This includes the Webex Event that the team created and hosted for the Permanent Secretary in which 907 people attended. Alongside these events and updates the team continue to manage the enquiry mailbox and the maintenance of the intranet and internet Covid-19 hubs so that all stakeholders are informed of the latest updates in relation to the DAERA Department.
- A Task and Finish Group on Resilience and Wellbeing has been created and will work to identify ways of providing support to our Departmental colleagues in these difficult times both for those at home and in work.