

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Thursday 21 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.
- The Direct Payments to Farmers Amendment Date (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (NI) 2020 will provide for this extension. They are made under the negative resolution procedure and come into operation on 31 May.
- The deadline for the Single Application has now passed. By midnight on 15 May, 24,494 applications had been received compared with 24,432 in 2019. An additional 170 late applications were received in 2019 and it is considered unlikely that the same number of late applications will be received this 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. 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. 1,186 Farm Businesses have availed of this service. This service will remain in place to assist farmers and agents to amend applications.
- 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 were made under the confirmatory procedure.
- 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. 966 applications were received by the deadline on 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 – Output from the sector remains at 100% of demand, with levels of absenteeism reported as continuing to fall. Following commencement of Covid-19 testing for key workers, this has been used successfully by staff within the meat and dairy processing sectors. However industry representatives have raised concerns that the response time has increased.

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. The latest market statistics showed beef prices have been stable since the beginning of the year but started to fall during March with the average steer price reaching a low point of £3.15/kg for the week ending 25 April (down 16p/kg on March prices). Since then prices have increased to £3.22/kg and it is expected that forthcoming statistics will show further increases as weekly quotes have been improving and are now more or less back to early March levels. Lamb prices fell by 40p/kg six weeks ago but have since recovered to prior levels. 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 23.00p/litre for April milk (down 0.75p/litre on March and 2.25p/litre on February cumulatively). Dale Farm have also announced a base price of 23p/litre for April milk (down 1p/litre on March and 2p/litre on February cumulatively). Other firms that have announced price drops include Glanbia Cheese (0.5p/litre for April milk), Glanbia Ireland (0.5p/litre for April milk) and Aurivo (1.25p/litre for March milk).

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 continue to impact 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 including grants, rates relief, loans and EU (CMO) schemes.

Position – DAERA continues to work closely with industry to assess the potential impacts on the supply chain, and to explore mitigation measures if required. DAERA are also in regular contact with the other Devolved Administrations and have written to DEFRA seeking a commitment from UKG to provide enhanced funding to address the challenges that lie ahead.

4. While supply chains have been functioning well, there remains the potential for a build-up of livestock on farms (particularly in the intensive sectors) and or products e.g. milk if problems develop. 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 to explore mitigation actions if required.

5. Many horticulture businesses producing and selling spring bedding plants, cut flowers and ornamentals rely on sales at this time of year. 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 asked Executive colleagues to consider how sales of such produce could be facilitated, specifically raising the issue of Garden Centres re-opening which has been included in Phase 1 of the NI Executives Recovery Plan if they can implement the social distancing measures. The agreement to open garden centres will not only contribute to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the population but also help save many otherwise viable businesses. DAERA continues to explore what other support may need to 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 food 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 (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 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. 23 livestock markets have now recommenced sales, implementing the new protocols. Video technology has also been used at a number of mart venues over past weeks for sellers to view the sales 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 Essential Legislation

- The Agriculture Bill's Report Stage and Third Reading took place in the House of Commons on 13 May.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

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.

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

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 slaughterhouses are working normally with full throughput maintained.
- Following the recently reported development of Covid-19 clusters in meat establishments, VSAHG officials continue to meet with the Public Health Agency, Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and the industry to ensure adherence with PHA guidance in all food processing establishments.
- 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 explore alternative methods to deliver checks on compliance with legislation in consultation with Industry and the FSA NI.
- **Current Position**
- The FSA NI agreed flexibilities that could be implemented for meat and poultry inspections to ensure continuation of supply if staff resource was constrained due to Covid-19. As staffing levels have been maintained and to avoid export certification issues, DAERA officials are not currently implementing the agreed flexibilities.
 - Risk based sampling of third country imports of feed ingredients for undesirable substances has recommenced.
- A number of remote checks have commenced to verify aspects of carcass classification in both bovine and porcine slaughtering plants. These include the remote viewing of data and selected beef carcass images to verify accuracy of carcass classification, cold carcass weight calculation and deadweight price reporting data.

Bovine TB Programme

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, revised temporary measures for bovine TB (bTB) testing have been introduced, based upon the principles that:
 - (i) testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances; and
 - (ii) 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.
- **Current Position**
 - The implementation of the revised temporary measures remains under review.

Trade Export Certification

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, a number of easements in relation to export health certificates for exports of live animals and products of animal origin to Australia, Gibraltar and the United States of America have been introduced. In addition, all commodities from the United Kingdom (UK) to China will be accepted on the basis of a digitally transmitted copy of the Export Health Certificate (EHC) issued in advance of the arrival of the consignment.
- Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.

Import Controls

- Portal Branch are preparing to recommence personal import (baggage) inspections in airports as international arrivals are reintroduced. The staff resource in Larne and Belfast Ports is also being increased to deliver a wider range of biosecurity inspections.

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.
- **Current Position**
- Work is continuing to quantify the need for funding to support Northern Ireland zoo establishments and to inform considerations on the development and administration of 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.

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.
- The communications campaign devised alongside the DAERA Press Office around littering, with particular focus on littered PPE, has been continuing and will do so over the next few weeks.
- Following on from last week's announcement by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister there are 55 Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) which have re-opened as at 18 May 2020 with further sites expected to re-open in a phased manner over the coming weeks.
- Minister Poots issued a letter to the Chief Executives of all 11 local councils on 16 May 2020 notifying them of the amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 in relation to HWRCs.
- 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. Leaflets were delivered to all households last week.
- 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 (DWI).
- 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. DWI and NIEA continue to work with NI Water to ensure that public health protection is maintained as they prepare to increase monitoring again.

- 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 and site access 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 continue to work 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.
- As a number of businesses make plans to reopen, DWI has published guidance on the DAERA website to provide advice to anyone re-opening buildings after a period of closure, to ensure all necessary steps are taken to maintain water quality.

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 engage with other Departments regarding funding for charities and explore options regarding how best to use the Department's Environment Fund to support the sector with the delivery of natural environment priorities which will also assist in supporting their resilience.

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 Department convened a meeting on 12 May with other site managers of informal outdoor spaces (including councils, eNGOs, and PSNI) to discuss the potential for a joint approach to the reopening of these sites at the appropriate time.
- A further meeting has been arranged for the 19 May at which updates will be provided regarding the timeframes in which each organisation consider that they can progress with re-opening taking account of the legislation and public health guidance.
- Through the co-ordination work with other providers it is hoped that they will be opening their sites in a similar timeframe. This will enable increased access to a range of outdoor spaces and reduce the risk of too many people using the same site at once.
- A phased approach to reopening of outdoor space facilities is likely. Car parks which had been closed at DAERA Country Parks and Nature Reserves will be reopening in a first phase from 27 May. Other facilities such as toilets, cafes and playparks remain closed. The Department will be monitoring and reviewing the situation.

- The Department is involved in meetings with Defra and the other administrations and also convened a meeting on 13 May with NI informal outdoor recreation representatives to discuss joint messaging, to reinforce the public health guidance, which could be used to help keep people safe as more people begin to use outdoor spaces as restrictions ease.

Glenavy Fishkill

- A major fish kill was discovered on the Glenavy River on 8 May. Following the report from a member of the public, NIEA and Inland Fisheries staff undertook a joint investigation following agreed procedures.
- DAERA Inland Fisheries have confirmed that the number of fish mortalities occurring as a result of the incident were 790 Brown Trout and 807 Stone Loach. Chemical and biological samples were taken from the river as part of the investigation however the results are not yet available.
- The initial evidence would point to a short duration 'plug' of pollution having entered the river prior to 8 May which had a significant impact on the fishery, but which given its short duration, is hoped to have had a lesser impact on the overall ecology of the river.
- The criminal investigation of this incident under the Water (NI) Order 1999 remains ongoing.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The Public Bill Committee scrutinising the Bill at Westminster has suspended all activity until further notice. No further information is available at this stage.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Nothing new to report.

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.

- A motion to confirm the Scheme by the Assembly must be debated within 3 months of making the Scheme, which in effect is by summer recess. The date for the motion will be determined by the Business Committee, at some date subsequent to the report on the SR by the Examiner of Statutory Rule, and then consideration by the AERA Committee.
- 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, 145 applications have been returned and 44 appeals have also been received.
- 145 Letters of Offer and Claim Forms have been issued, with 112 returned by 14th May. As of 15th May, the Department has made payments to vessel owners totalling £409,200.
- 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.
- The Minister has agreed to fund a scheme to support the aquaculture industry of up to £360k, covering the months of March through to May. The scheme will draw on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.
- 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.
- The Minister has opened angling in the Public Angling Estate from the 18th May with anglers advised to stay local and observe social distancing measures. Carparks will open up on the 27th May.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- Nothing new to report.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Nothing new to report.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

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 15/05/2020

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 15/05/2020

Around a third of admin staff continue to work in the DAERA Direct offices on essential services, whilst maintaining social distancing, on any given day on a rota basis. The remainder are working from home on PCs and laptops, which have secure access to the relevant DAERA databases such as APHIS, NIFAIS, CIS etc.

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 15/05/2020

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 (3 rural) deemed ineligible by CFNI have now been 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 15/05/2020

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
May	40	23 (1st – 8th May)

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 15/05/2020

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 work is proving to be a very effective partnership approach to delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable rural dwellers.

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.

UPDATE POSITION 15/05/2020

To date 1,137 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 175 of these people have received other forms of support such as food, medicines etc.

Farm Families Health Check Programme (FFHCP) - COVID-19 Response

The overall aim of this temporary service is to support those most vulnerable (70+) who have previously availed of the FFHCP. In this initial phase, Farmers, farm families and rural community members in the identified group in the Northern Trust area have been contacted by telephone, using current shielding package guidance. From the contact these individuals have been signposted to other services, e.g. Rural Support, in relation to farming issues and to provide advice on various matters including physical and mental health and in a small number of cases, advice to contact their GP regarding a new or existing health condition was provided.

To date 90 contacts have been made to those 70+ with 82 of these people having received support and advice. As a result of the positive feedback and response to this pilot initiative, the service will now expand into the Western Trust area.

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 15/05/2020

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.

In terms of practical activity on the ground, RSN's have been involved in a wide range of community initiatives including the following:

- **250 food parcels delivered**
- **48,500 postcards delivered in local communities**
- **700 community groups contacted to review baseline of covid19 impact**
- **13,500 pairs of gloves distributed community groups**
- **100 litres of hands sanitiser delivered to 70 community groups**
- **748 flyers distributed**

- **360 E bulletins issued**

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 15/05/2020

No change

Written Ministerial Statement – 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report

The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the Act) places a statutory duty on departments, local councils and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act to have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas in the development, implementation, revision and adoption of policies, strategies and plans and in the design and delivery of public services. The Act came into operation for departments and district councils on the 1 June 2017 and for the other public authorities on the 1 June 2018.

Section 3(2) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 requires DAERA to publish an annual monitoring report on all the information compiled by all the Public Authorities listed on The Schedule to the Act. The 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report was laid in the Assembly on 12 December 2019.

Section 3 (3) the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (the Act) requires the Minister to make a statement to the Assembly on the contents of the 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report.

UPDATE POSITION 14/05/20

The Minister made a written statement to the Assembly on Thursday 14 May 2020. This is in accordance with Standing Order 18 of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The statement relates to the content of the 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report which DAERA laid in the Assembly in December 2019.

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

LEADER

- DAERA has provided advice to all Councils responsible for administering 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 15/05/2020

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 and Working Group to put in place the structures that will help support recovery and prepare the industry to respond when consumer demand ultimately returns. 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 15/05/2020

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 15/05/2020

RAD continue to process claims and make payments relating to TRPSI and LEADER.

From 1st May to 12 May LEADER funding worth just under £650k has been paid to rural Businesses, the Community & Voluntary Sector and Councils.

Rural Development Programme

Programme	March		April	
	No of Payees	Amount	No of Payees	Amount
LEADER	59	£1,934,932.61	51	£1,599,568.68
Running Costs to LAGS	6	£156,981.39	11	£404,268.06
TOURISM	2	£255,944.91	3	£525,825.49

Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation (TRPSI)

Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019				Rural Business Development Grant Scheme			
No.	Claims Paid	Grant Amount Paid		No.	Claims Paid	Grant Amount Paid	
16/3/2020 - 8/5/2020		16/3/20 -8/5/2020		16/3/2020 - 8/5/2020		16/3/20 -8/5/2020	
323		£397,011.11		112		£364,772.12	

Local Community Development Support Service Programme:

£173,000 paid to Rural Support Networks to cover the period 1 April to 30 June 2020.

£70,000 paid in micro grant management fees for the 19/20 scheme.

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 15/05/2020

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

UPDATE ON ESSENTIAL LEGISLATION

- No Essential Legislation

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 15/05/2020

The impact on the Budget continues to be monitored.

Forest Service:

Following the reopening of the angling facilities on the DAERA estate and in line with Step 1 of the Executives Coronavirus Recovery Strategy, Forest Service is taking steps to reopen its car parks for vehicular access. This will significantly extend the pedestrian access use of individual sites to local people who are living outside a reasonable walking distance to the sites. More people can then undertake activities such as walking, running and in some places cycling, offering a huge benefit to their mental health and well-being. We are actively engaging with providers of other outdoor spaces with the view to collectively implementing the reopening of a substantial number of sites to avoid the risk of too many people using too few sites.

The Minister has indicated a reopening date for car parks of 27 May and it is vitally important that once open, users continue to act in a socially and environmentally responsible way to ensure the ongoing safety of visitors and staff.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

AFBI Testing

- AFBI, in collaboration with Queens University Belfast and Ulster University, are supporting the Department of Health's efforts in respect of Covid-19 testing
- An SLA with the Belfast Trust has now been signed.
- Quality Assurance testing has progressed well and testing is due to start within days, pending approval to proceed from the Regional Virus Laboratory (RVL).
- AFBI hope to achieve 1000 tests per day when fully operational.
- Testing has been scheduled for an initial period of 12 weeks.
- The release of staff to work on Covid-19 testing is currently planned so as not to impact on the priority animal health and food safety testing programmes. This will, however, be kept under close review.

Update on IT/People

- 2,850 DAERA staff are now equipped to work from home and deliver services.

Update on Food Supply Security

- DAERA led on the cross-departmental Haulier Analysis Project. The evidence shows that currently the transport of critical goods into and around Northern Ireland is not a significant issue. The project Task & Finish Group will produce a current status of the industry and next steps paper.
- DAERA are the NI representative on the COVID-19 Economic and Business Response Implementation Group, Task and finish group. The Task & Finish Group is coordinating the UK

response to supply and demand for critical goods and any potential interventions required for the haulage industry.

- DAERA has produced 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. The team have ran another successful Webex event which had 882 staff in attendance along with the Minister. Due to the growing popularity of the Webex events across the Department the communications team have worked with DAERA's Digital Services Division to develop a range of informative "how to" guides to help enable groups within the Department and across the NICS to reach out and chat via video call to as many of their staff and stakeholders as possible. Feedback from this has been extremely positive.
- 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.

Update on Finance

- The Committee is aware that a bid for a £105m support package was submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) in March. This bid has since been reviewed and refined and is now classified as a "Marker bid". A new substantive Support for Farming Sector - Market Intervention Resource Bid of £107.5m was submitted to DoF on 6 May.

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 12 May 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Food and Farming		
Agri-food sector		
	The current situation with potato crops being under threat due to months of extreme weather and derogation of the Greening crop diversification requirement due to adverse weather conditions show	The Department, in conjunction with food, farming and environmental stakeholders is developing a future agricultural policy framework which will seek to deliver an industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks (such as market and currency volatility, extreme weather events, etc.) which are ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed.

	<p>that, as the Covid-19 situation develops, farmers are still having to deal with extreme weather events due to climate change. Going forward, what strategies are being put in place to support farmers dealing with extreme weather events, as these become only more frequent and more severe as the effects of climate change become more apparent?</p> <p>In relation to the proposed £105m agri-food support scheme, as concerns around disruption of movement of inputs and outputs have not materialised on non-horticultural farms at present, has the Minister considered restructuring how the support would be allocated in order to support sectors that are experiencing more severe and immediate hardship, such as the ornamental horticulture sector?</p> <p>Can the Minister confirm whether the Department will be proceeding with an urgently needed financial compensation package for the ornamental horticulture sector? If so, when can growers expect to see details of the scheme announced and to be able to apply?</p>	<p>While disruption of the agri-food supply chain has thankfully not materialised, it is still a risk and all options for support remain under review. The Minister is well aware of the difficulties faced by growers in the ornamental horticulture sector and has asked officials to explore options for providing direct financial support. In addition, by encouraging Executive colleagues to agree that Garden Centres would open in Stage One of the Recovery Plan, Minister Poots has ensured that the financial impact on the sector has been reduced.</p> <p>At the meeting with the NI Executive on 22 April the Minister asked Executive colleagues to note that COVID-19 has the potential to cause imminent, significant and long-lasting impacts on the domestic ornamental horticulture production sector. Minister Poots raised again the difficulties faced by dedicated growers in his statement to the Assembly on 30 April.</p> <p>DAERA officials have continued to develop options for providing direct financial support to the sector, and in doing so are in liaison with other authorities and business contacts. Legal, economic, technical and budgetary considerations need to be satisfied before the Minister can reach a balanced decision on additional financial interventions.</p>
<p>RAFSET TRPSI</p>		
	<p>Can the department provide a list of the nine organisations deemed ineligible by CFNI for the</p>	<p>The 9 organisations that have benefitted to date are as follows:-</p>

	<p>Coronavirus Community Fund who have been granted aided through the partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Nation Ministries, NCM House, 218 York Road, Belfast • Annaghmore L.O.L., 51 Annaghmore Road, Castledawson • Antrim St Vincent de Paul, 74 Steeple Road, Antrim • Ashes to Gold, Unit 32 Loughanhill Industrial Estate, Coleraine • Crossfire Trust, 95 Darkley Road, Keady • Damask Community Outreach, Seymour Street Church Premises, Lisburn • Magherafelt L.O.L. District 3, Meeting House Avenue, Magherafelt • Passionist Peace & Reconciliation Office, 614 Crumlin Road, Belfast • Prison Fellowship, 39 University Street, Belfast
<p>VSAHG</p>		
<p>Update on essential legislation</p>		
	<p>What essential legislation does the department foresee may not be completed on time or to standard? What is being done to ensure that this work is prioritised?</p>	<p>The identified risk relates to legislation required to support the implementation of any aspect of the Northern Ireland Protocol and future trade agreement with the EU that falls within VSAHG's remit.</p> <p>VSAHG is taking steps to reduce this risk materialising. This includes reviewing the delivery of other non-essential business to ensure that priority is given to deliver the legislation and ensuring that available resource across the Group is utilised. VSAHG also continues to work closely with Defra and Departmental lawyers in relation to the legislation.</p>