

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 22 April 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.
- By 15th April, over 9,150 had submitted their SAF, an increase of 42% from 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.
- A derogation has been put in place 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.

Covid 19 – Current key issues for Agri-food sector

1. While supply chains are still working effectively there remains significant concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus grows among workforce. Calls were made by industry to have some level of quick testing for staff following self-isolation before returning to work and to have specific advice on how best to check/screen staff entering the workplace.

Position – DAERA raised this request through the C3 structures and FSA also raised this directly with DoH. DAERA is working with agri-food stakeholders to identify the type and number of key workers (private and public sector) that could be tested to help inform Government planning exercise. NIFDA estimate output from the sector remains at around 100% with levels of absenteeism reported as having reduced to 8.5% on average (15/4/20) from a high of 14% (3/4/20).

2. In addition there was concern at the lack of specific advice for agri-food sector workers on Covid H&S measures and calls were made for suitable protocols to be developed. NIFDA and NIMEA have developed and implemented protocols with input from FSA, HSE, DAERA and other agencies.

Position – Businesses are each putting their own measures in place to protect and reassure staff in line with current guidance on the GOV.UK website. DAERA is continuing to monitor the situation and impact, and will liaise with NIFDA, NIMEA and Food Processors.

3. Agriculture price slump 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 slump 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 absenteeism (currently 8.5% on average). Industry representatives have raised concerns that a sharp fall in beef price is on the way. The latest market statistics shows beef prices had been stable since the beginning of the year but have started to fall. The quoted prices for beef this week are around 17p/kg (5%) lower than those of four weeks ago. Lakeland dairies has announced a base price of 23.75p/litre for March Milk (down 1.5p/litre on February). It is the first processor to announce its price for March milk.

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

4. Financial pressures are increasing rapidly in businesses 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 is calling for financial support measures and Government have made available grants, rates relief, and loans

Position – DAERA are working 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.

5. 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 (milk a real concern – reports on 7 April on BBC of milk being dumped in slurry tank in GB). After COP on 17/04/2020 the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) released the following Press Release: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dairy-industry-to-join-together-to-manage-milk-supply> This Press Release relates to the BEIS decision to temporarily relax UK Competition Law to allow the dairy industry to work together to help address the impact of the loss of sales to the foodservice sector as a result of Covid 19. This relates to Competition which is a reserved matter. The territorial extent of the planned related Statutory Instrument will be the whole of the UK, including NI. DAERA has yet to see the detail of the SI and will provide a further update when we receive further details.

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.

6. 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. 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.

7. Industry raised concerns regarding Brexit, stating that they are struggling to cope with the challenges of both the current Covid situation and the expectation from UK Government that Brexit will continue as planned. Businesses have called for a 'pause' to current Brexit plans. DAERA informed businesses that current UK Government position is that Brexit is continuing as planned, and DAERA too are not immune to this.

Position - Officials to make Minister aware of Industry concern regarding additional pressure of Brexit.

8. 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, e.g. animal welfare issues due to build-up of livestock or non-collection of milk.

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

9. 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 will be explored including virtual sales, buyer only markets and specialist sales.

Position - DAERA are working with the markets to ensure livestock movements can be facilitated by a combination of Aphis on-line and telephony services. In conjunction with DAERA and HSENI, the markets have agreed a set of robust operational protocols that would permit the gradual and phased reintroduction of sales in a limited way for particular categories of livestock. Individual marts are exploring alternative ways in which livestock trade can be undertaken such as video sales or facilitating arrangements between individual sellers and buyers. Gortin Market held an online sheep auction on Monday 13th April in line with the agreed livestock market protocols. The mart operator reported positive feedback from the PSNI in relation to implementation of the protocols and further auctions are planned.

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 all students are actively engaging with college lecturing staff 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.
- CAFRE have recently launched the European Innovation Partnerships (EIP) scheme which is designed to help farmers work collaboratively with experts to address the practical issues or

opportunities they are facing on their farms. The scheme is currently open for applications until Monday 27 April 2020.

- Arrangements have been agreed to facilitate the use of CAFRE's residential facilities by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with a number of health workers already 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 some of which have already been collected.

Rural Development Programme

- Officials are assessing the impacts of Covid-19 on Rural Development Programme schemes and considering advice from the European Commission. The DAERA website will be updated regularly. In the meantime, applications can continue to be made subject to individual scheme deadlines.

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

Covid-19 Update

Delivery of Official Controls

- The delivery of official controls at slaughter houses including ante and post mortem inspections and verification of compliance with animal, health and welfare requirements continues.
- The pausing of routine official control inspections will, over time, impact on meeting targets for risk-based delivery of official controls. To mitigate this, alternative methods to deliver checks on compliance with legislation are being developed in consultation with industry and the FSA NI.
- While routine food and feed inspections have paused, essential sampling work including raw milk and eggs for the National Residue Control Plan and C1 cereal seed for certification continues ensuring that Public Health guidance on COVID-19 is followed.
- While cross compliance animal based inspections are currently suspended, VSAHG are examining possible amendments, in view of Covid-19, to be implemented when inspections resume.
- On 14/4/20, FSA NI agreed further flexibilities in relation to poultry inspections. Most notably, ante-mortem inspections can be now be conducted on a representative sample of a flock, rather than on every load received.
- Work continues to introduce Private Veterinary Practitioners (PVPs) into Food Businesses to assist with meat inspection. Four PVPS have commenced meat inspection work in meat plants.

Bovine TB Programme

- On 30/3/20 the Minister moved to update the approach to bovine TB (bTB) testing. In general, bTB testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances, which are based upon the primacy of public health requirements.
- In a further move on 9/4/20, the Minister announced that herd restrictions would not come into effect until 35 days after a test has become overdue. This is an extension of 28 days from the existing grace period of 7 days and is intended to **help those herds that are not currently under a TB restriction to continue to trade as normally as possible during these difficult times.**
- Until further advised, keepers will not be referred to the paying agency for overdue TB 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.
- Bovine TB surveillance will continue for all slaughtered cattle in meat plants and through sample submissions to the Agri-Food and Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI) laboratories.
- The position with regard to bTB testing in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK is being kept under review as the situation develops.

DAERA Epidemiological Support to PHA

- VSAHG Veterinary Epidemiology team is providing expertise to assist with collaborative studies on COVID-19 with the Public Health Agency NI, the HSCNI and Queen's University Belfast.

DAERA Offer of Respiratory Unit /Protective Clothing

- Veterinary Service has made an offer to provide 30 powered respirator units to local health trusts to protect frontline health workers when dealing with high-risk COVID-19 patients and has offered to supply 100 waterproof suits.

Trade Export Certification

- To facilitate the continued delivery of export health certification, the supporting computer system, DAERA's Export Certification On-Line (DECOL) system has been enhanced.
- The new functionality which is available for the top 170 export health certificates (EHCs) in Northern Ireland, allows Meat Inspection Teams working remotely in meat processing establishments to generate the final version of an EHC for issue by a certifying officer thereby replacing manual processes and reducing the administrative burden. As a result, export health certification continues to be delivered with a reduced and more flexible workforce.

Epizootic surveillance and response to suspects

- VSAHG maintains capacity to investigate and respond to potential outbreaks of epizootic disease.

Animal Welfare

- VSAHG Welfare and Enforcement Branch continue to monitor welfare during transport issues. Serious welfare complaints and enforcement investigations are also continuing as usual.
- Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division continue to respond to queries from animal organisations, directing them to potential funding sources and government and business guidance.

Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

FISHERIES ISSUES

Covid 19 Update

Fisheries - Sea Fishing Sector

- On 3 April the Minister announced that the Department would proceed with a scheme of financial support for the sea fish catching sector.
- This will require secondary legislation made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The SR has been drafted and DSO has agreed to examine the draft SR urgently. At present the SR is on track for being made by the end of April.
- Application forms and terms and conditions for the Scheme have been drafted and these will be issued to eligible applicants during the week beginning 20 April.
- The Scheme was considered by the AERA Committee on 9 April and the Committee raised several queries that were responded to on 10 April. The questions raised by AERA Committee in week commencing 13 April have also been responded to.
- Some vessels continue to fish where there is a market for their catch but overall activity is greatly reduced due to the severe drop in demand for fish.

Aquaculture Sector

- There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products as a result of COVID-19. DAERA officials have been gathering the relevant economic information to examine what measures might be necessary to support the aquaculture sector and how to deliver this.
- Consideration is being given to the recent amendment to the European and Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provides the possibility of granting financial compensation to aquaculture farmers for the temporary suspension or reduction of production, where it is the consequence of the coronavirus outbreak.
- 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.

Inland Fisheries

- Lough Neagh Fishing Co-operative Society has suspended its fishing operations due to the markets closing down and also in response to concerns over the health and welfare of staff.
- The Department is currently considering what additional measures to support the Lough Neagh fishermen can be put in place at this time, other than those already outlined by the Government.
- Angling at the public angling estate waters has been closed and fishermen have been advised to stay at home at this time and not to go fishing.
- Inland Fisheries Inspectorate staff visited approximately 160 sites over the Easter weekend. Social distancing measures were being followed with a small number of exceptions which were quickly resolved.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- DEFRA expects the Devolved Administrations to have had the Legislative Consent Motions debated in their respective assemblies before the Final Reading of the Bill in the first House at Westminster.
- 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.
- 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.

NI Harbours

- All 3 harbours are open, services reduced in line with reduced fishing activity.
- Ardglass: NIFHA staff hours close to normal as fleet (excluding inshore) is largely back to work.
- Kilkeel: A few boats fishing. Slipway now closed (but preparations underway to introduce a safe method of operation to facilitate a working fleet).
- Portavogie: Remains very quiet. Slipway closed.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

ENVIRONMENT ISSUES

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.
- These key messages continue to be communicated through various official online channels and social media accounts as well as being shared by many local councils and those within the waste management industry, with significant reach to date.
- The Department is working closely with local councils to monitor waste management operations. Engagement with local councils and the waste industry is ongoing and DAERA will pro-actively pursue this engagement as the situation evolves.
- The Minister is planning to submit a paper to the Executive regarding Household Waste Recycling Centres.
- 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.
- A Policy Position Statement on the importance of the waste sector and workers within it during the ongoing coronavirus outbreak has been published on the Department's website. This can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/policy-position-statement-waste-management-essential-service>

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 the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and its Drinking Water Inspectorate.
- NI Water continues to maintain the required drinking water standards. It has implemented its major incident plan and Analytical Services Contingency Plan to manage its resources.
- 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.

Water Quality

- NIEA continue to operate their 24/7 water pollution response. All reports of water pollution received via the 24hr hotline 0800 807060 and email Emergency-Pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk are being logged, triaged and where appropriate investigated.

- Duty officers make an assessment of the pollution severity based upon the details provided and any incident assigned a medium or high severity will be investigated.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- Northern Ireland Environment Link issued a Coronavirus Impact Survey to Environment and Conservation Organisations in Northern Ireland which closed on Friday 10 April. Survey results were received by the Department on Friday 17 April and are being considered. A further meeting between eNGO representatives and senior officials is to be arranged.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- NIEA visitor centres, cafes, mobile concessions and public toilet facilities remain closed. Where possible vehicle access to sites has also been closed. Despite the good weather and the traditionally busy Easter period for Country Parks, these measures have still maintained a significant reduction in visitors. No significant incidents of note occurred during the Easter week. Departmental officials have been liaising with PSNI over any local site issues as required.

Wildfires

- Earlier this month, the Minister issued press releases advising that no one should start a fire in the countryside and place further strain on our already stretched emergency services. Officials in the Department have continued to alert stakeholders to the prevailing risk of wildfires to aid in vigilance and preparedness. Unfortunately despite these measures a number of significant wildfires have recently occurred. Further press releases are being developed. NIEA continues to liaise with Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service on these matters.

Air Quality

- An air pollution alert was issued on Thursday 9 April 2020 in respect of moderate levels of air pollution which were forecast for Friday 10 April. A number of these air pollution alerts are issued every year. There is an agreed Protocol for issuing alerts. It involves liaison with DoH, Defra, Met Office and an independent contractor with monitoring and forecasting responsibilities.

Regulatory Position Statements

- NIEA is continuing to develop its Covid 19 Regulatory Position Statements (RPS). Covid-19 RPSs only apply where it can be demonstrated that the requirement to operate outside the normal regulatory conditions (e.g. that specified in a waste authorisation for a temporary period) is as a direct consequence of disruption caused by Covid-19.
- NIEA will adopt such regulatory positions only when required. They are designed to ensure continued protection of human health and the environment as far as possible, whilst assisting key industries, such as the waste industry, to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The work of the Parliamentary Bill Committee will not resume until 28 April, at the earliest. DAERA officials have sought clarification through Defra on a likely date for the resumption of scrutiny of the Environment Bill but that information is not yet available.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- A bid was made for Covid 19 funding to support local councils and the waste sector. Under initial proposals from the Finance Minister no Covid 19 funding has been provided. The Department has liaised with both the Department of Finance and the Department for Communities to avoid any duplication of funding, and continues to work with NILGA and SOLACE on the likely waste costs.

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 16/04/2020

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 16/04/2020

Staff continue to work in the DAERA Direct office on essential services whilst maintaining social distancing. Arrangements continue to be made to allow more personnel to work from home where possible.

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 16/04/2020

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. The DAERA Minister has agreed to contribute £200k of funding 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.

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 16/04/2020

Rural Support continue to deal with calls and offer support.

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 16/04/2020

Last week 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 has now commenced.

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 16/04/2020

No change.

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 16/04/2020

The Rural Support Networks have been identified as delivery partners by Councils and all are involved in the community response.

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 16/04/2020

No change

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 16/04/2020

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.

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 16/04/2020

Work by bidders to the tender continues with a closing date of 5 May 2020, after which 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 16/04/2020

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

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 16/04/2020

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 16/04/2020

The impact on the Budget continues to be monitored.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

Covid 19 update

PORTS / FERRIES

DAERA continues to support DfI to ensure the continuation of the movement of goods (particularly food and associated products) between GB and NI and vice versa (by Ferry). This is a key issue to ensuring the supply of food, chemicals and medicines and is of the utmost urgency. A decision on a possible support package is imminent.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- On 9 April 2020 the Executive agreed to allocate £1.5 million Resource DEL to support the Northern Ireland fishing industry. This assistance to fishing vessels is tailored towards addressing a gap in the existing support and relates to the fixed costs incurred by a vessel when it is unable to go to sea.
- On 15 April 2020 the Minister wrote to the Minister of Finance identifying a new bid of £1.3m Resource DEL for AFBI to assist the health service in testing up to 1,000 samples a day from suspected COVID-19 cases.

Updated – 20.4.20

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 15 April 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group		
EMFG	<p>Can DAERA ensure that the recovery of NI's economy post-Covid-19 will not be at the expense of the climate crisis and that recovery measures will not serve to work against the UK and NI's international climate commitments?</p> <p>What plans (if any) are in place for relaunching the agriculture and fisheries sectors/ economy for a green recovery that can act as an accelerator of the transition towards climate neutrality?</p>	<p>The Minister has made it clear that tackling climate change is a priority for both DAERA and the Executive and this remains the case.</p> <p>DAERA's focus since onset of the Covid 19 crisis has rightly been on supporting these sectors in dealing with the immediate challenges it presented. While this work remains ongoing, DAERA are exploring how to best use the opportunity presented by the current crisis in helping to deliver a sustainable green recovery. Planning is at an early stage but work is underway.</p>
Fishing Industry	For the 30 vessels that do not meet the £10,000 landings value threshold and are therefore excluded under the proposed support scheme, what supports are available to them?	These vessels earnings from fishing are well below the national minimum wage of £17,056 (£8.20/hr @ 40 hours and 52 weeks). They are therefore not dependent on fishing and are assumed to have other income for which they could receive other support. Furthermore fishermen who are part-time tend also to be seasonal. This tend to happen in the summer

	<p>Have concerns been raised by stakeholders as to their exclusion?</p> <p>Can DAERA provide an update on the status of the 81 non-EEA workers employed on self-employed contracts who cannot access self-employed assistance?</p>	<p>months and therefore they would not have experienced hardship to date.</p> <p>Stakeholders have not raised concerns about their exclusion.</p> <p>The Department believes these individuals will have access to the Government's Covid19 funding arrangements. At this stage mechanisms for payment to such individuals have not been tested but the Department is working to ensure messages to this sector are clear in this fast-developing area.</p>
Fishing Industry	<p>The report acknowledges a significant downturn in activity/catches. It has been pointed out that many crew, non EU citizens, cannot access benefits, such as Universal Credit, or other avenues of government assistance. Is DAERA involved in trying to find solutions?</p>	<p>The Department has discussed this issue with DEFRA and Scottish Government and believes non-EEA crew affected by the downturn will have access to the Government's Covid19 funding arrangements. We will monitor this when payments are rolled out.</p> <p>The Department has also engaged with the Department for Communities. They have an arrangement in place that such workers should be brought ashore if they become infected with Covid19 and accommodated at the expense of the Department of Health.</p>
Fisheries	<p>Provide an update on what Schemes/measures is currently being investigated to support the Aquaculture Sector</p>	<p>The Department has been gathering the relevant economic information to examine what might be necessary to support the aquaculture sector and the most effective means of delivering this. Consideration is being given to the recent amendment to the European and Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provides the possibility of granting financial compensation to aquaculture farmers for the temporary</p>

	<p>Provide an update on what additional measures the department is exploring to support Lough Neagh fishermen.</p> <p>Fisheries Bill – What are the impacts.</p> <p>The department has stated that 1.5 million for covid 19 funding to support sea fishing sector has been met. – What is the timescale for the roll out of this support?</p>	<p>suspension or reduction of production, where it is the consequence of the coronavirus outbreak.</p> <p>The Department has assessed information and considers that the Lough Neagh Fishermen do not have the same fixed costs and no assistance can be provided at the moment. The Department has increased the European Maritime Fisheries Funding (EMFF) grant for glass eel stocking into Lough Neagh, from 50% to 60%. The Department is also looking as to whether storage aid for the fishery on Lough Neagh would be appropriate and if it could be delivered within the parameters of the existing NI EMFF Programme.</p> <p>DEFRA is at present proceeding with the Fisheries Bill. The Devolved Administrations will be expected to contribute as normal to the Bill's passage and respond as necessary. DAERA is currently managing resources as best it can to cope with this.</p> <p>We anticipate being able to start making payments in early May.</p>
Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformation Group		
Rural Support	<p>What is DAERA doing to support those with no broadband or access to IT equipment to access interim measures for livestock trade while marts are closed, such as video and online sales?</p>	<p>DAERA has enhanced its Cattle Registration Telephony system to enable farm-to-farm cattle moves to be notified and confirmed by telephone.</p>

		To minimise disruption to livestock movements at this difficult time the Department is also working closely with Livestock Mart operators as they trial options such as: online sales, matching buyers and sellers and animal weighing facilities.
	What is the timescale for the publication of a draft Rural Policy Framework?	To date, the draft Rural Policy Framework has been informed by feedback received at the stakeholder event held in January, and evidence contained in the five Working Group Reports produced in February. Although efforts are being focused on the COVID-19 response, officials are continuing to progress the development of the overarching draft Rural Policy Framework. Subject to approval, it is still anticipated that a draft Framework will go to full public consultation in the Autumn.
	What pressures if any is rural support facing?	<p>There has been an increase in the volume of calls to the Rural Support Helpline over the period of the Coronavirus crisis.</p> <p>DAERA officials continue to liaise on a regular basis with Rural Support and are reassured by them that they have adequate resources in place (staff, volunteers and mentors) to deal with the volume of calls being received, the issues that arise from them and other initiatives that they are developing and working on at this time.</p>

	<p>The department has indicated that £12.6m of Leader funding is affected due to covid 19. Can the department outline what is the worst case scenario regarding this funding? What engagements is the department having with the EU commission?</p>	<p>Some businesses may not continue with the RDP investment due to the expected downturn in the economy. It is too early to provide the number of businesses in this situation. For all those businesses with a Letter of Offer and for projects taken forward by the community and voluntary sector or Councils which are currently held up because of the current restrictions the Department will work closely with LAGs and Councils to maintain a flexible approach utilising easements provided by the EU. This will facilitate the utilisation of all budget allocations before the programme end.</p> <p>The Department is engaging with EU Commission officials on advice regarding flexibilities due to Covid-19. Officials are considering the advice and seeking clarity from the Commission when necessary. This includes flexibility around extending existing project deadlines.</p> <p>.</p>
<p>Forest Services</p>	<p>Can the department provide more detail on this initiative; the number of staff involved and vehicles, also a geographical/council breakdown?</p>	<p>Forest Service meets by teleconference daily with Councils and DfC Food Distribution project managers.</p> <p>Forest Service are assisting Councils individually who are still refining their preferred operating model to best suit the scale and volunteering distribution issues within their respective areas. Some Councils are pursuing a model of distribution from a designated Food Distribution Centres to numerous community premises for onward distribution mainly by voluntary groups and individuals. Others wish to distribute more directly from Food Distribution Centres to the householder. In both cases Forest Service has</p>

		<p>offered resources to assist in either the transfer of parcels to the community premises or distribution directly to householders.</p> <p>The potential DAERA overall resource of 70 staff and vehicles has been coordinated and FS is directly in liaison with 6 Councils that have the potential to require distribution services during week commencing 20 April.</p>
Food and Farming Group		
Agri-food sector	<p>What options have been explored by DAERA to alleviate pressure on farms to hold stock and/ or dump product? (It was estimated this week that the equivalent of the milk production of 300 farms is currently being disposed of in the UK).</p> <p>Does DAERA have an update on the possibility of redirecting surplus product to foodbank/box schemes?</p> <p>In instances where businesses are putting their own protocols in place in line with government guidance, what is the recourse for workers where adequate social distancing, cleaning, etc. is not being adhered to in their workplaces?</p>	<p>There is no intelligence to suggest livestock are being held on farms or product dumped in NI. Nevertheless, DAERA is considering this risk and undertaking prudent contingency planning, including regular contact with industry representatives, DEFRA and the other Devolved Administrations, to develop appropriate mitigations.</p> <p>A decision on this this would not be within DAERA's remit. Price for some commodities has fallen, however, there is no evidence to date that processors are dealing with unmarketable produce.</p> <p>In these cases, workers can report non-compliance with guidelines to the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland, who will investigate the circumstances.</p>
	Regarding the financial pressures that are now increasing can the department explore the opportunity for farmers to apply for the small business scheme of £10,000 announced by the Department of Economy?	Farm businesses are not eligible for the 'Small Business Support Grant' as claimants must be in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief or benefit from Industrial Derating. Farm businesses do not

	<p>Can department outline other opportunities to support farmers?</p>	<p>come under these categories as agricultural land and buildings are exempt from business rates.</p> <p>Some farmers may be eligible for the Self-Employment Income Support scheme (SEISS). This scheme, administered by HMRC, allows a self-employed person to claim a taxable grant worth 80% of their trading profits up to a maximum of £2,500 a month. HMRC will be writing to all eligible businesses. The Corona Virus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) is designed to assist small and medium sized businesses, and some farms may also be eligible for this (criteria includes annual turnover of up to £45 million, to access loans, overdrafts, invoice finance and asset finance of up to £5 million for up to 6 years). This scheme is backed by the British Business Bank and delivered through commercial lenders</p>
	<p>Beef and Milk Prices Collapse.</p> <p>What is the NI Assembly doing to support the farmers who are working 24/7 now that Beef and Milk Prices have collapsed.</p> <p>Farmers have watched the Business and Retail Industry have almost immediate decisions made on support to them and even money £10,000 put into bank accounts without applying for it.</p> <p>What is the Minister of AERA doing for the farmers NOW. The farmers are not interested in this looking to Europe for money, and further they cannot understand why they cannot get immediate support from, they too have bills to pay immediately, ie food bills for animals such as meal etc.</p>	<p>DAERA is exploring a wide range of potential support measures along with colleagues in Defra and the other Devolved Administrations. These include the suitability of existing Covid Crisis measures; the possibility for European Union support using the Common Market Organisation (CMO) schemes such as public intervention; and national support schemes. The latter will be subject to state aids rules and will require funding to be secured from HM Treasury. A combined approach to HMT from across the UK is being pursued.</p> <p>The figures referred to relate to a reasonable worst case contingency planning assumption,</p>

	<p>In the 8 April written briefing you indicate that 20% of stock will not be moving off farms for around 3 months from April, do you envisage animals being required to be slaughtered and disposed of without being sold, and milk being dumped?</p> <p>In the 8 April written briefing you indicated DAERA had submitted a bid for £105 million for farming/animal welfare issues. What are the details of how this bid of £105 million is comprised of?</p>	<p>not a prediction. DAERA does not expect this to happen but as part of diligent contingency planning, is making plans to deal with such an occurrence should it happen. DAERA is working closely with the agri-food industry on a regular basis, to establish the sectors most at risk and the potential scale of an impact. This will inform the type of responses likely to have most success. Though any such schemes will be dependent on UKG funding.</p> <p>The DAERA bid was based on the reasonable worst case scenario – i.e. dealing with the effects of not being able to market 20% of farm produce for a period of approximately 3 months.</p>
Single Application	Is the department confident in this current climate that the deadline will be met by the majority of farmers?	The response of farmers to date would provide that confidence. DAERA has enhanced its telephony and online facilities to enable farmers to make SAF applications within the required timeframe. Farmers are heeding the call to submit applications by the deadline. To date, the number of applications made is over 40% higher than the same period last year.

Outstanding responses to questions that arrived late from information provided on Wednesday 8 April 2020

Inspections

- We have temporarily stopped most inspections to reduce the risk to staff, the farming community, and others.

What inspections are still taking place?

A small number of Environmental Farming Scheme inspections have been taking place in order to facilitate payment of claims. These inspections have not involved the inspector being in physical proximity to the farmer.

Statutory Instrument (SI) to temporarily relax competition law

- On 27 March, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) made a Statutory Instrument (SI) [The Competition Act 1998 \(Groceries\) \(Coronavirus\)\(Public Policy Exclusion\) Order 2020](#) to temporarily relax competition law with respect to retail supermarkets and logistics services providers (e.g. haulage companies). This SI allows groceries suppliers (direct and indirect) to enter into agreements to coordinate quantities and ranges of essential products, deployment of staff, supply to certain groups of people, and to share information about stock and logistic services providers. The SI also permits logistic services providers to coordinate staff deployment and share information about storage capacity and vehicles. The [Explanatory Memorandum](#) provides further information, including definitions.
- The SI was made by negative procedure, came into operation on 28 March 2020 and it applies retrospectively to agreements entered into from 1 March 2020. Competition law is a reserved matter under Schedule 3 paragraph 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Key NI stakeholders have been informed of the changes.

Have any concerns been raised by stakeholders?

DAERA officials are not aware of any specific concerns raised by NI stakeholders on this temporary relaxation of competition law.

The DAERA Minister has raised concerns about anecdotal evidence that the shopping basket has already increased in cost, and the need for government to be alert to the opportunity available for supermarkets to be less competitive to the public, and exert more buying power over the food sector who have lost their restaurant hotel outlets.

DAERA has raised these concerns with Whitehall officials who lead on this reserved matter. The Committee may wish to note that the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), which enforces UK competition law, has recently issued a number of press releases on price rises; written an [open letter for businesses in the pharmaceutical and food and drink industries](#), and [launched a Covid-19 taskforce](#) to monitor market developments. In addition, on 4 April 2020, the CMA launched an online service for reporting businesses believed to be behaving unfairly during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. A range of practices may be reported via the online questionnaire including unfair prices for consumers and business to business sales.

Current key issues arising from DAERA engagement with agri-food industry stakeholders

1. While supply chains are still working effectively there are significant concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work will decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus grows among workforce. Calls were made to have some level of quick testing for staff following self-isolation before returning to work and to have specific advice on how best to check/screen staff entering the workplace. Will DAERA carry out safety & compliance checks in workplaces?

Many retail staff are disclosing lack of social distancing and cleaning facilities

Position – DAERA raised this through the C3 structures and FSA also raised this directly with DoH.

2. In addition there is concern at the lack of specific advice for agri-food sector workers on Covid H&S measures and calls were made for suitable protocols to be developed. It was recommended that sectors produce their own protocols initially using the most up to date government guidance. Ideally a single protocol for the agri-food industry should be agreed. NIFDA plan to issue such a document.

Who will monitor & check compliance?

Implementation of protocols will be through self-regulation by industry.

Position – NIFDA and NIMEA have developed protocols with input from FSA, DAERA and other agencies. Businesses are each putting their own measures in place to protect and reassure staff in line with guidance on the GOV.UK website of 25/03.

NEED TO SEE THE PROTOCOLS & CHECK FOR COMPLIANCE

Protocols have been developed in consultation with DAERA, HSE and FSA using current guidance from Public Health England via the Gov.UK website. Implementing the protocols will be the responsibility of each business and compliance with them will be monitored through self-regulation.

3. Concern growing about 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 (milk a real concern – reports today of milk not being collected on 30 farms in Wales over the weekend).

Can surplus product be donated to foodbank/box schemes?

There is no intelligence to suggest stock will have to be held on farms or product dumped. DAERA are considering the risks and potential for these events and are undertaking prudent contingency planning which involves regular contact with industry representatives, DEFRA and the other Devolved Administrations to explore mitigations.

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 explore options.

