

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 6 May 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Covid 19 update

Single Application

- On 30 March 2020, the Minister confirmed that the closing date for the 2020 Single Application would remain as 15 May 2020. Northern Ireland is the only region in the United Kingdom which makes direct payments in October. Any extension to the application period could delay payments in October 2020. However, the period during which farmers can amend claims without penalty has been extended to 09 June 2020.
- To 29 April, over 13, 200 had submitted their SAF, over 24% higher than the same period last year.
- DAERA Direct offices are closed to the public. Area-based Schemes Division staff are working from home to provide an enhanced SAF Advisory Service. Action is being taken to give additional staff the ability to work from home to ensure continuity of this service. A service has also been put in place for DAERA staff to submit Single Applications online for applicants who have no broadband or access to I.T. equipment who would have availed of a Digital Assistance appointment in their local DAERA Direct office in the previous scheme year. This service is also available for farmers who wish to transfer payment entitlements.
- A derogation has been announced to remove the Greening crop diversification requirement for 2020 because of adverse weather conditions earlier in the year. This is in line with action taken by England, Scotland and Wales. Other Greening requirements remain.
- The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will provide for this derogation. They will be made under the confirmatory procedure and, subject to the necessary clearances, the intention is for them to be considered by the Committee on 14 May and by the Assembly on 19 May.
- All inspections have been paused until at least mid-May. Consideration is being given to how these can begin again on a phased basis whilst minimising any potential risk to staff or customers.
- The fourth Tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher level, opened for applications on 24 April 2020 for 3 weeks.
- 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 remains significant concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus remains within workforce. Calls have been made by industry for Covid-19 testing to be made available for key workers within the Agri-food sector to ensure adequate numbers of staff are available to maintain the food supply chain.

Position – DAERA raised this request through the C3 structures and FSA also raised this directly with DoH. DAERA has been 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 (22/4/20) from a high of 14% (3/4/20). PHA issued further guidance on 22/4/20 in relation to the Coronavirus National Testing Programme for frontline workers who are having to self-isolate due to having coronavirus-like symptoms or because a member of their household has symptoms. This information included who is eligible for testing and how they should go about arranging it, which DAERA officials have shared with Agri-Food stakeholders. Following commencement of this testing programme, it has been reported that it has already been used by staff within the dairy processing sector and is working well. Results are available within 24 hours which it has been noted has been helpful in providing reassurance to the workforce.

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 high levels of absenteeism (currently 6.8% 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 started to fall five weeks ago with prime cattle now down 16p/kg (5%) and cull cows down 29p/kg (11%). Lamb prices fell by 40p/kg (%) four weeks ago but have since recovered to prior levels. The latest GDT auction (21 April) for milk products showed a decline of 4.2% from the previous auction (cheddar up 1.9%). There are concerns over future NI milk prices but currently no reports of any disruptions to milk collections from NI farms. Lakeland dairies has announced a base price of 23.75p/litre for March Milk (down 1.5p/litre on February) and Dale Farm announced (24/04/20) a 1p/litre price drop for March milk. Other processors that have announced price drops for March milk include Glanbia Ireland (2 cent/litre for ROI farmers) and Aurivo (1.25p/litre for NI farmers).

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

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, specifically raising the issue of Garden Centres re-opening and calling for a review. He has suggested that the re-opening garden centres could be part of a graduated response if they can implement the social distancing measures. This would not only contribute to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the population but also save many otherwise viable businesses. DAERA is exploring what support can be provided to the ornamental horticulture sector.

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 - Minister has been made aware of industry concern regarding additional pressure of Brexit and continues to engage with colleagues in Westminster and the other Devolved Administrations on key Covid 19 and Brexit issues.

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

Position - DAERA has worked with the markets to ensure livestock movements can be facilitated by a combination of Aphis on-line and telephony services. Markets have

developed protocols in conjunction with DAERA and HSE that will enable them to conduct business in a manner that is safe for staff, farmers and buyers. 16 livestock markets have recommenced sales, implementing the new protocols, during the week commencing 27th April. A further five livestock markets plan to recommence sales week commencing 4th May. Video technology has been used at a number of mart venues over past weeks and this will continue to be used. Industry feedback on the use of this technology has been very 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 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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 slaughter house establishments are working normally and full throughput is being facilitated.
- FSA NI has agreed further flexibilities in relation to meat inspections that are, the emergency authorisation of suitably qualified individuals to carry out official controls and reduced official attendance in low capacity establishments. In relation to poultry inspections, ante mortem inspections can now be conducted on a representative sample of a flock, rather than on every load received.
- While routine food and feed inspections have paused, essential work including the sampling of raw milk and eggs for the National Residue Control Plan (NCP) and inspections of raw drinking milk facilities continues.
- The pausing of routine food and feed inspections will, over time, impact on meeting targets for risk-based delivery of official controls. To mitigate, alternative methods to deliver checks on compliance with legislation are being developed in consultation with industry and the FSA NI.

Current Position

- Agri-Food Inspection Branch (AFIB) is working to recommence the sampling of imported feed materials and engaging with traders to establish operating procedures.
- Preparations continue for the required inspection and sampling work that may arise from local applications to the Public Intervention Scheme for Skimmed Milk Powder and the EU Private Storage Aid for meat and dairy products.

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 is continuing for all slaughtered cattle in meat plants and through submissions of samples to the Agri-Food and Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI) laboratories.

Current Position

- In response to requests from industry, VSAHG has considered further changes to TB testing rules to facilitate safe testing and the essential movement of cattle.
- The Minister announced, on 30 April, updated guidance on changes to bTB testing rules during the Covid-19 pandemic to enable more tests to take place within Public Health Agency guidelines.
- The changes include:
 - A temporary exemption from herd tests for calves under 180 days of age where their handling prevents social distancing and a number of additional temporary measures to ease the burden on farmers during this temporary phase, while also maintaining animal health controls.
- Updated Q&As have been published on the DAERA website to reflect the latest change: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/testing-bovine-tuberculosis-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Trade Export Certification

- Trade Programme officials continue to work with UK government – Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) on the development of contingency plans for third country export certification to streamline the process and facilitate remote working. As these arrangements require bilateral negotiations with many third countries, this area of work is both sensitive and challenging.
- Contingency measures have been agreed for exports to Great Britain and the European Union which require export health certification by authorised veterinary inspectors (AVIs) in private veterinary practices.

Current Position

- With effect from 29-4-20, a number of easements in relation to export health certificates for exports of live animals and products of animal origin have been implemented for exports to Australia, Gibraltar and the United States of America. Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.
- The easements include:
 - The issue of an export health certificate on plain white paper instead of Crown Vellum thereby allowing the transmission by email of partially completed certificates to the relevant certifying

veterinarian for printing and completion and the acceptance of consignments on the basis of an emailed copy of the certificate.

Import Controls

- Essential official imports controls at Northern Ireland's ports continue to be delivered to ensure that disease risks from imported goods, animals and plant material are minimised.
- Officials have engaged with authorities across the UK to agree low-risk easements for EU import procedures to enable business to continue when social distancing is necessary.
- The significant reduction in domestic and international flights has permitted an increased focus on the risk of disease from parcels imported from overseas.

Epizootic/TSEs Surveillance and Response to Suspects

- VSAHG maintains capacity to investigate and respond to potential outbreaks of epizootic disease.
- Carcase testing for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs) including bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) continues.
- Any suspect BSE cattle will be investigated as a requirement for the continuation of BSE Negligible Risk status for Northern Ireland.

Disposal of Animal By-Products and Fallen Stock

- While there is currently sufficient rendering capacity for the disposal of animal by-products, industry has reported insufficient storage capacity for an accumulation of tallow and hides. This issue has arisen because of the downturn in international markets for these products. VSAHG officials continue to liaise with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and industry representatives to facilitate a solution.
- In the event of significant disruption to current rendering capacity, contingency plans for the disposal of fallen stock have been developed. Officials continue to engage with industry and NIEA to monitor the situation.

Animal Welfare and Identification

- VSAHG's Welfare and Enforcement Branch continue to monitor welfare during transport issues. Serious welfare complaints and enforcement investigations are also continuing.
- Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division continue to respond to queries from animal organisations directing them to potential funding sources as well as government and business guidance.
- Identification, Registration and Movement controls of farmed and non-farmed animals continue to be delivered with increased emphasis on the use of on-line and telephony facilities.

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.
- Key principles and guidance for waste management services were approved and have been published. These were issued to the NI Executive, Council Chief Executives and yourselves, along with accompanying letters. The principles form the basis of non-statutory guidance, providing Councils with advice on steps that should be considered prior to any decision to re-open Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs), with safety and clear communications as the top priorities.
- This non-statutory guidance to assist Councils and the waste sector to make appropriate decisions around HWRC services in response to the Covid-19 is available to view at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-councils-household-waste-recycling-centres-hwracs>
- Regulatory Position Statements (RPS) are designed to ensure continued protection of human health and the environment whilst assisting key industries, such as the waste and wastewater industries, to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic period. These statements are available to download at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/waste-regulations-temporary-covid-19-waste-regulatory-positions>
- The Department of Infrastructure's Chief Planner has agreed to include a short article in the April Chief Planners update in which Councils are being asked to familiarise themselves with the RPSs and to work with NIEA colleagues to ensure a consistent approach in dealing with the waste industry, particularly where waste management licence/permit conditions are common to, or derived from planning permissions.
- The WRAP NI communications strategy (developed in association with DAERA) is live, with radio adverts and social media content continuing to the end of May. Social media assets have been used by councils and NGO's, meaning that a clear and consistent message is being shared across Northern Ireland. The three main messages are around bin hygiene; managing your waste (minimisation and prevention) and how to deal with waste that may potentially be contaminated, underpinned by the message to keep recycling.

- 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.
- The Municipal Waste Tracker managed by the Strategic Investment Board is proving to be a very valuable tool in monitoring the provision of Councils' waste management services and the broader capacity within the waste sector, ensuring relevant issues are flagged and managed with daily updates. The tool has also been used to monitor the reopening of the Household Waste Recycling Centres along with the issue of fly-tipping in which most councils have seen an increase during this Covid 19 period.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NI Water's ongoing provision of safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment continues to be prioritised and regulated by NIEA and its Drinking Water Inspectorate.
- NI Water continues to maintain the required drinking water standards. 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.

Regulatory Position Statements

- Published Regulatory Position Statements relating to emissions monitoring, waste, water regulation and the extension of existing cemetery sites can be accessed from the DAERA website at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/daeras-and-nieas-regulatory-response-covid-19>.
- The published Regulatory Position Statements have also been shared with the operators and organisations directly affected.

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 also engaging with other NI Departments and with other UK administrations to consider what COVID-19 related monies may be available for the eNGO sector and is also exploring options regarding how best to use the Departments Environment Fund to support the sector with the delivery of natural environment priorities.

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. No significant incidents of note have occurred recently.
- NIEA has initiated correspondence and undertaken a survey to seek information from and engagement with, other key stakeholders to help inform the partial and complete re-opening of outdoor recreation properties such as parks, nature reserves, walking routes and associated facilities in the future.

- This does not indicate an imminent change in restrictions, it simply helps us start the process of sharing information and considering the practicalities of any future reopening of sites and the potential to help distribute public pressure on the use of these properties and provide consistent messaging and coordinated information to the public.
- **Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill**
- The work of the Parliamentary Bill Committee has been suspended until further notice. Clarification has been sought from Defra but resumption of Committee business is a matter for Parliament, not the UK Government.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Councils have submitted a bid to the Department for Communities of £3.83m in respect of additional waste management costs as part of a package of support measures.
- The Department is engaging with DfC to avoid any potential for duplication with COVID-19 related monies.

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 SR has been cleared by the Departmental Solicitor's Office and will become operational on 4 May after which payments can be made. The Scheme will be known as the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (NI) 2020.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 147 vessel owners on 22 April and 79 letters of ineligibility were issued on 23 April to the remaining active vessel owners. To date, 129 applications have been returned and 25 appeals have also been received. The process of sending out Letters of Offer and claim forms will start week commencing 4 May 2020.
- 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. 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. A submission, outlining the delivery mechanism alongside a preferred option for support to the

aquaculture industry is being finalised and will be forwarded to the Minister for consideration shortly.

- 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. Eel fishing, due to start on the 1st May, has been indefinitely suspended and no permits issued by the LNFCS.
- The Department has considered what additional measures can be put in place to support the Lough Neagh fishermen, other than those already outlined by the Government. The fixed costs for these fishermen are not the same as sea fishermen (lower) and many are unlikely to reach the required income threshold. Therefore no additional help can be provided in respect of these.
- Any help for additional storage costs cannot be met under the current criteria for the EMFF programme, with the only possibility the provision of additional storage facilities which is not what is required at the moment. The Department is keeping the situation under review.
- Angling at the public angling estate waters remains closed and anglers have been advised to stay at home at this time. These sites have however remained open for pedestrian access throughout this period. DAERA remains in contact with the other UK jurisdictions on this issue and discussions have taken place on what steps are required to enable a resumption of angling to be considered.

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. The latest indicative timings from DEFRA suggest that the Bill will have its final reading in the House of Lords at some date mid-May to early June 2020. It is expected that the Bill will have its first reading in the House of Commons in early June, with the Committee Stage, when any amendments would be tabled at the end of June.
- 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.

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 01/05/2020

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 DAREA 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 01/05/2020

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

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

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, 74 rural organisations have been supported with £172,612 awarded, an average award of £2,332.60 while eight organisations deemed ineligible by CFNI will now be grant aided through a partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network

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 01/05/2020

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	115 (up to 24th)

Role of Rural Community Transport Partnership (RCTP's)

- Through the TRPSI Programme, DAERA officials have been working in conjunction with Dfl 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 01/05/2020

The DAERA and Dfl 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 and is proving to be a very effective partnership approach to delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable rural dwellers. This is proving to be a very effective partnership approach to delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable rural dwellers. To date over 3,000 food parcels have been delivered by the local Rural Community Transport Operators.

SPRING Social Prescribing Project

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

To date 394 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 79 of these people have received other forms of support such as food, medicines etc.

Rural Community Development Support Service

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

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

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

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

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 01/05/2020

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

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

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

DfE has established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group to now put in place the structures that will help support recovery and prepare the industry to respond when consumer demand ultimately returns. In support of this work, Tourism NI is also establishing a Working Group and RAD will nominate a participant to this Group too.

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 01/05/2020

DfE lead on Project Stratum. 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 01/05/2020

RAD continue to process claims and make payments relating to TRPSI and LEADER. Some 99 Rural Business Development Grant Scheme claims have been paid up to a value of £329k and 234 Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme claims have been paid up to a value of £297k. A further £200k to Tourism projects has also been made.

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

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

UPDATE ON ESSENTIAL FINANCE OR BUDGET INFORMATION

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

UPDATE POSITION 01/05/2020

The impact on the Budget continues to be monitored.

Forest Service – Covid-19 Update

Forest Parks

Last week the Minister affirmed that Forest and Country Parks were open for pedestrian access to provide people with a spacious environment to exercise in a manner consistent with public health advice on social distancing. This complies with NI regulations, including where there is 'reasonable excuse' to travel for exercise. Car parks as well as caravan and camping and associated facilities remain closed.

Forest Service has commissioned risk based and targeted forest ranger patrols to monitor the Forest Parks across Northern Ireland since 10 April 2020. Over the period no major issues were identified, however through close liaison with PSNI a few minor issues were identified and addressed before they

had the potential to develop into a more serious situation. We are pleased to report an overall high level of adherence to guidance and the Covid-19 Regulations.

Additionally, Forest Service represent DAERA on a PSNI Situational Awareness Group providing updates in relation to the monitoring of forests and Country Parks. The group was formed to enable situational awareness and assist PSNI more generally to address risks of crowds gathering in popular beauty spots, including forests, which require a Police response in relation to the Covid-19 regulations. The group includes representatives from Fire and Rescue Service, Ambulance Service, Belfast Harbour Police, Coastguard and Local Government as well as the PSNI and Forest Service.

Food Distribution – DAERA Assistance to Councils

DAERA/Forest Service meet by teleconference daily with Councils and DfC Food Distribution project managers. The food package service has been in operation since 7 April and was set up to help those most at risk of food insecurity due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes those who are shielding following advice from their GPs, as well as people who are financially vulnerable or who may be experiencing difficulties in accessing food. Forest Service are assisting Councils individually on their preferred operating model that best suits the scale and volunteering distribution issues within each Council area. Forest Service are coordinating the wider DAERA resource to assist in distribution of food parcels to vulnerable people and are engaging in front line delivery services as required by Councils.

Forest Fire Update

The extreme dry and settled weather conditions prevailing across Northern Ireland for most of April, coupled with the lack of fresh vegetation growth, created a wildfire risk rated as 'severe'. Forest Service implemented its emergency fire management procedures and worked closely with NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) in response to these conditions. Staff and machinery with purpose built all-terrain machinery transported fire-fighters and fire-fighting equipment to remote and difficult access locations reducing the potential damage to the natural environment on both DAERA and privately-forest owned land. The welcome rain of this past week has significantly reduced the wildfire risk to a level normally expected at this time of year. Forest Service staff will continue to be deployed on a rota basis to monitor the fire risk and implement a rapid response, with the support of NIFRS, where incidents of wildfire occur before these can escalate.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

Covid 19 update

NI Harbours

- Working with the NI Fisheries and Harbours we are aware that all 3 harbours are open, though services reduced in line with reduced fishing activity.

Update on Ferries / Hauliers

- DAERA officials have been liaising with NI Govt Depts DfI, DfE (lead) on gathering evidence that would highlight the key issues affecting NI Hauliers in maintaining the supply of critical goods

for Northern Ireland in this current crisis. This may then lead to identifying the need to develop a specific intervention of potential support measures for Northern Ireland hauliers.

Update on Food Security

- Keeping Food on Our Shelves has been recognised as a key issue by the Northern Ireland Executive. Food supply security is a vital objective for the Executive during both the current Covid 19 crisis and for the foreseeable future. The Executive has agreed to give this issue focussed consideration and a paper has been presented to the NI Executive with regards to Food Security. This is a cross Departmental approach, however it is expected this will be assigned to one Department (possibly DAERA) in due course. The paper outlines the objectives, risks and mitigations in respect of the current Food Security assessment as well as Key Activities currently underway by NICS Departments.

Update on IT/People

- Work is ongoing to provide the necessary architecture, hardware, tools and support to enable large numbers of staff to work effectively from home to deliver essential DAERA services. Approximately 2,400 staff will be able to work from home by 30 April 2020, exceeding the original target of 2,300. Work is progressing well to source, procure, configure and distribute remote working devices and equipment to the remainder of DAERA staff and the Department is on target to meet, and exceed, the target to have 2,500 staff equipped to work from home by mid-May 2020;
- DAERA continues to provide a range of essential online services to customers and citizens. As part of the recovery phase, digital services and applications will be developed to support Departmental priorities and digital delivery targets;
- DAERA has built on early work to maximise the use of video conferencing, audio conferencing and other collaboration tools to allow effective distributed working and maintain a high level of productivity across the Department. Approximately 1,800 members of staff now use collaborative tools and technology as part of their day to day work. Following an initial online web conference pilot on 15 April 2020, a second session was held in one of the Department's business groups, with 110 staff logging into the event. Again, initial feedback has been very positive. It is hoped that these events will become an effective platform to communicate and engage with staff across the Department throughout the pandemic and beyond; and
- Enhancements have been made to the online application to log the status of staff, their availability to work and any instances of unavailability due to COVID 19. Improvements include additional locational data capture and enhanced reporting information for managers.

Update on Communications/Engagement/Staff Well Being

- In relation to communication, a specific Covid-19 communications team has been established to provide staff and stakeholders with the relevant information in this challenging time. The Communications team have taken a number of steps to help provide this information as widely as possible, these steps are outlined below:

Intranet Hub – Link is [here](#) – This hub provides staff with a range of useful guidance and links they may need during this time, there is also a Q&A section for staff questions and a news centre and working from home section to help people stay engaged.

Internet hub – Link is [here](#) - This is largely for interaction with external stakeholders and provides useful links and guidance on business tips etc at this time. Once again there is a news centre and a Q&A section for stakeholders to obtain answers to FAQs.

Mailbox – There is a covid-19 mailbox which has been created for all stakeholders, the covid-19 communications team manage this mailbox and direct any questions to the relevant personnel and add any FAQs from the mailbox to the hubs as mentioned above.

Webex events – Recently the team have created and hosted a number of Webex Events to allow senior management to connect directly with staff, the last event in which the Permanent Secretary was in attendance reached 907 attendees. These events have been hugely popular as outlined in the feedback reports.

DAERA Dashboard – Link is [here](#) – A weekly dashboard has been developed by the DAERA DOC team, this dashboard provides staff with a weekly update on the key areas of DAERA’s response to the challenges at this time. The DOC have worked with the comms team to have this added to the intranet and issued to all staff.

All of the above are forms of staff engagement but there is also work being undertaken to develop staff wellbeing and resilience training which will then be rolled out to all staff were possible when finalised.

Questions from Members

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Food and Farming		
Agri-food sector	Has the Minister any update on the proposed £105m agri-food support scheme?	As indicated previously, the initial bid from DAERA was very much focused on the threat that absenteeism in input supply, downstream transport and processing sectors might disrupt the movement of inputs and outputs to and from farms. These concerns have not materialised but we continue to monitor the situation closely. However, the non-edible horticulture sector faces mounting difficulties with the closure of routes to

	<p>Has the Minister gave consideration to creating a funding scheme to give direct support to farm businesses in the interim until a wider UK-EU support package is agreed?</p>	<p>market as this is their peak season for sales and support for these growers is being considered.</p> <p>The Minister is keeping all options for providing direct support to farm businesses available to him under review. He is in regular contact with Ministers in the other Devolved Administrations, and has written to the Defra Secretary of State seeking a commitment from UK Government to provide enhanced funding to address the challenges that lie ahead for farmers and growers.</p>
	<p>How is the sector managing to still produce at 100% and still implement proper social distancing?</p> <p>Are those who are having to self-isolate due to having coronavirus-like symptoms or because a member of their household has symptoms getting full pay?</p>	<p>The Food Processing sector is currently producing to 100% of retail customer demand but not necessarily 100% of previous levels of production due to the impact of closures in the Food Service and Hospitality sectors. The PHE (England) issued guidance (25/3/20) that as far as reasonably possible 2m social distancing should be observed. NIFDA and NIMEA have developed protocols in relation to social distancing on production lines and food processors are putting in place measures to protect staff. Food processors have implemented this guidance having made physical changes to their production lines, including the installation of screens, use of PPE, amended shift patterns and a reduction in the number of product lines being produced.</p> <p>NICS staff will continue to receive pay during the COVID emergency period. All periods of sickness absence that have been either diagnosed as COVID-19 or symptomatic of the virus either at home or at work will not impact on sickness absence review points or contractual sick pay. Any absence due to COVID-19 will not lead to a pay detriment. Staff who are self-isolating where a member of their household is showing symptoms may work from home if in a position to do so or may apply for a period of paid special leave for up to 10 working days/14 calendar days.</p>

		DAERA is not in a position to comment on policies in the Private Sector/wider Agri-food Industry.
Inter-Ministerial Group for EFRA	Can the department provide a list of the “hot topics” discussed at the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment Food and Rural Affairs met on Monday 27th April?	Hot topics discussed in relation to Covid-19 included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vulnerable people • key sectors at risk and mitigating actions (beef, dairy, ornamental horticulture) • planning for the recovery phase <p>It was agreed that consideration of a four-nation approach for EFRA sectors was important and would complement measures that administrations may take to tailor responses in each UK nation.</p>
Single Application Form	In light of the COVID crisis, social distancing requirements and the fact that many DAERA staff and farm agents are working remotely, will any flexibility be given to farmers who miss the 4th May SFP entitlement transfer deadline and/or the 15th May SAF return deadline ?	Farmers and agents have been submitting entitlement transfers and Single Applications in unprecedented numbers and no issues with access have been reported to the Department by farmers or agents. The Department has put in place an enhanced digital assistance service which enables farmers to make entitlement transfers and Single Applications over the telephone. So far, over 400 farmers have used this service. The application deadlines will remain in place and the Department will be operating the enhanced digital assistance service over the whole bank holiday weekend.
	What is the current status of the NI Agrifood marketing body launched by DETI in 2015?	Consideration of an NI agri-food marketing body is being led by the Department for the Economy: further detail is still being sought from them and a response will be provided as soon as possible.
RAFSET		
TRPSI	Which organisations have the advancement of religion in their constitutions? What organisations do the department consider would be eligible for this separate stream of funding based on their ineligibility for CFNI Coronavirus Community Fund?	Individual organisations determine the content of their own constitutions and therefore the inclusion of the advancement of religion as one of the purposes of articles is prevalent in the constitution of organisations that have strong links to churches i.e. Faith Based organisations. Those Faith Based and indeed other organisations that have the advancement of religion in their constitution are eligible to apply to the Community Foundation Northern Ireland Coronavirus Community Fund and if their application meets all other eligibility checks and the organisation are content for their application to be forwarded to Rural Community Network then they will be considered for funding by

		RCN. This is in recognition of the role played by such organisations in rural areas during this unprecedented event.
Rural broadband	If there are existing rural wifi hotspots, has the department considered having these opened so that as many people as possible have access to internet during the Covid crisis?	This issue is not within the remit of DAERA and all organisations are currently complying with UK Government and PHA guidance regarding Covid 19 restrictions. DfE are the lead department on such issues. Telecommunications is a reserved matter led by the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). DfE have shared links to recently published initiatives taken by the telecommunications industry, led by the DCMS, to support vulnerable consumers.
	Finance have announced that there is £7.5 million for rural broadband through project stratum, and yet DAERA have a budget of £14.3 million for their own digital transformation. Can you explain why digital transformation has so much more money?	DAERA's original intention was to invest £7.5m Capital in 2020-21 and 2021-22 totalling £15m towards Project Stratum and we formally advised DoF of that as part of the 'Budget 2020-23 Process' exercise last September. This project is led by DfE and the total project budget required is estimated to be £165m. Since then DfE has advised that it does not need a contribution from DAERA to this project in 2020-21 and so the £7.5m will not be required in the current financial year. However, the expectation is that DAERA will still contribute at least £15m Capital to Project Stratum over the two years from 2021-22 subject to allocations by the Executive in future Budget The Digital Transformation budget covers the development of IT systems across the full range of functions of the Department including delivering up to 1.6 million transactions per annum online and rationalising back-end processing to improve the quality, speed and efficiency of service delivery. This builds on the success of the online SAF system, where digital transformation paved the way to deliver early payments to farmers.
VSAHG		
Trade Export Certification	Could the department provide a list of the third countries with whom an easement has been agreed?	Easements have currently been agreed with US, Australia and Gibraltar. Engagement is ongoing with a number of other third countries and we expect the list to be added to as this progresses. We will keep the AERA Committee informed of additions to the list.
Disposal of Animal By-Products and Fallen Stock	Could the department provide detail about the contingency plans that have been developed in the event of disruption to current rendering capacity?	The Department continues to engage with industry regarding the development of contingency plans in the event that rendering capacity/throughput is reduced as a result of COVID-19. Rendering is currently the default position for the disposal of animal by-products. There are two category 1 renderers in Northern Ireland with a capacity of approximately 3.3 thousand tonnes per

		<p>week which are currently operating at approximately 75% capacity.</p> <p>Contingency plans to maintain rendering capacity for NI industry include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Availing of DAERA/DAFM contingency plan protocol agreed in 2015 for the optimal use of rendering capacity across the island of Ireland to provide for an emergency response where there has been; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a major unforeseen reduction to the rendering capacity (for example, during a plant breakdown); • an unforeseen major increase in requirement (for example, during a natural disaster or contamination incident); • in the event of a disease outbreak situation. 2) Diversion of material to GB for rendering. DEFRA colleagues and GB industry representatives have confirmed available spare capacity which would facilitate the controlled disposal of all material and was previously considered as part of Brexit 'No Deal' contingency planning 3) Hierarchy of Disposal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incineration - Only one high capacity incinerator in NI. Potential to increase throughput by 150% subject to NIEA permission. • Landfill - currently 5 operating landfills in Northern Ireland that are permitted to take biodegradable waste of this nature. • On farm burial – Derogation available in EU Animal By-Products Regulations to permit on farm burial in emergency situations. Environmental concerns need to be considered. <p>Burning – Last resort. There would be considerable public perception and environmental issues.</p>
EMFG		
Waste Management Collection, Storage and Processing	What is the nature of the involvement of the Strategic Investment Board? Is this extra work being commissioned for SIB? Is the department paying SIB for this work?	<p>The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) is a member of the Central and Local Government Strategic Waste Partnership (SWP). Members of the SWP, including SIB, have contributed to the contingency measures to ensure the delivery of critical local council services during the current crisis. SIB has offered, and used, its experience and networking to develop some of these measures. The Department is not paying for this work.</p> <p>The issues identified in relation to bin hygiene and contamination were very much household waste</p>

	Are similar efforts being made with WRAP NI to develop communications around industry waste?	focused. Local Councils do not have the same involvement in the collection of commercial waste. The messages are being delivered to every citizen in Northern Ireland so the issues around waste are transferrable to those dealing with commercial waste. These communications and types of messaging have been shared with the private waste industry whom DAERA have been liaising closely with throughout the pandemic. The messages can be used and shared by the private sector as they see fit.
Future Viability of Environmental NGOs	Can the department provide a list of the eNGOs they are engaging and meeting with?	<p>The Department has engaged with all Environment Fund Strategic Strand grant recipients by email and through Client Officers: Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT); Outdoor Recreation NI (ORNI); NI Environment Link (NIEL); Keep NI Beautiful (KNIB); Buglife; Centre of Environmental Data & Recording (CEDaR); British Trust for Ornithology (BTO); National Trust; NI Raptor Study Group (NIRSG); Ulster Wildlife; Newry Mourne and Down DC; Butterfly Conservation; The Conservation Volunteers (TCV); Lough Neagh Partnership (LNP); Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust (CCGHT); RSPB; Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP); Woodland Trust; Bat Conservation Ireland (BCI); Ballinderry Rivers Trust (BRT); Lagan Valley Regional Park; Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon BC; Irish Brent Goose Research Group.</p> <p>The Department developed a survey of the eNGO sector with Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the sector which issued from NIEL to all NIEL full members (c60 environmental and conservation organisations) and Environment Fund Strategic Strand recipients.</p> <p>Key staff are in twice weekly contact with the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Environment Link and the NIEA Chief Executive and EMFG Deputy Secretary and Directors have met twice with a number of NIEL Board members and others who represent significant areas of the eNGO sector, to discuss the concerns and needs of the sector and the results of the survey (National Trust, RSPB, Ulster Wildlife, Outdoor Recreation NI, NI Protected Areas Network chair from Mourne Heritage Trust, Woodland Trust, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful).</p>
Inland Fisheries	Will individuals be able to claim back angling licence fees now that they are being advised to stay at home?	The Department will consider the issue of refunds once the lockdown period has ended and it has had a chance to assess its full impact. An annual licence can be used for the entire calendar year as opposed to the short term 3 or 14 day licences options available. The public cannot currently purchase licences or permits

		as the system was been closed down on the 2 nd April 2020.
Air Pollution	What is the cause of increasing levels of particulate matter (PM) in Northern Ireland since the start of the year?	Around 46% of particulate matter in Northern Ireland comes from domestic wood and coal burning - 22% is from industrial combustion, 8% is from road transport and the remainder is from a variety of other sources. Whilst it is not possible to identify the exact source of the particulate matter, given that the early months of the year are colder, it is possible that domestic burning is the source. Officials continue to monitor air quality levels on a daily basis and are undertaking further analysis of trends.
Brexit	Given that the Minister has been made aware of industry concern regarding additional pressure of Brexit, has he raised this concern at Westminster?	The Minister raised these challenges highlighted by industry at the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment Food and Rural Affairs on Monday 27 April.
Budget		
	<p>The £7m Rural Business Community Fund to replace the current EU Priority 6. What measures are proposed to replace the other elements of Priority 6 (which is a £80m pot) - Basic Services; Co-Operation; Village Renewal; Broadband; Tourism?</p> <p>Is DAERA engaging with Dept for Economy to ensure that Project Stratum is targeted at addressing rural not-spots?</p>	<p>The Department is currently drafting a new Rural Policy Framework that will provide clear direction to address need in rural areas and inform a new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme which will support activity around the five key themes of: Innovation & Entrepreneurship; Sustainable Rural Tourism; Loneliness; Social Exclusion; Isolation, Health & Well-Being; Employment Opportunities; and Rural / Urban Connectivity. As the draft Framework has not yet been finalised or subject to public consultation new measures are not yet unknown. However, officials are considering what emerging issues could be addressed through pilot initiatives that would support rural businesses and communities recover from Covid 19.</p> <p>The Department is currently drafting a new Rural Policy Framework that will provide clear direction to address need in rural areas and inform a new Rural Business and Community Investment Programme which will support activity around the five key themes of: Innovation & Entrepreneurship; Sustainable Rural Tourism; Loneliness; Social Exclusion; Isolation, Health & Well-Being; Employment Opportunities; and Rural / Urban Connectivity. As the draft Framework has not yet been finalised or subject to public consultation new measures are not yet unknown. However, officials are considering what emerging issues could be addressed through pilot initiatives that would support rural businesses and communities recover from Covid 19.</p>

	<p>Will the Shared Prosperity Fund have a dedicated, ring fenced budget that will replace the Pillar 2 CAP Rural Development funding which will be lost after EU exit?</p> <p>Has DAERA been engaging with Westminster to secure this?</p> <p>The EU recently announced a scheme for private storage aid. We expect to avail of this until 15th October 2020. What will happen after that?</p>	<p>The 'Shared Prosperity Fund' is being developed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in Whitehall. However development of this fund has been delayed.</p> <p>The Department of Finance are in the lead from an NI Government perspective and the DoF Minister has recently written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.</p> <p>The Minister has written to the Defra Secretary of State to seek his assurance that the UK can access the recent measures, announced by the European Commission, until the end of the Transition Period. After the end of the Transition Period, agricultural support policy is a fully devolved matter.</p> <p>In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission on 22 April announced its intention to make private storage aid (PSA) available for dairying and livestock sectors. The Commission aims to have the measures adopted in the coming days, after consultation with Member States. We therefore anticipate that the granting of PSA for dairy (skimmed milk powder, butter, cheese) and meat (beef, sheep and goat meat) products will allow the temporary withdrawal of products from the market for a period. DAERA will update the Committee once the legislation is finalised.</p>
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