

20 January 2021

Ms Stella McArdle  
Clerk, Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs  
Room 244, Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Dear Ms McArdle,

**Re: Future Rural Affairs Policy Response**

Ards and North Down Rural Partnership is a fully inclusive and representative body comprising of both councillors and social partners. As you are aware, this body consists of individuals and organisations with experience and expertise in diverse aspects of rural development and is responsible for delivering a rural strategy that addresses local rural issues and needs.

It is believed that the development of a future Rural Affairs Policy is timely particularly in the context of the EU exit and the impending cessation of EU support initiatives, such as LEADER. However, it is disappointing that this policy has not progressed further given that this work commenced a number of years ago. The wider consultation is a valid part of this process which is yet to commence as the working groups to date are only representative of a small percentage of the rural population.

The Partnership broadly welcomes the thematic pillars and is in agreement with the key themes as overall priorities. The role of existing local delivery structures should be acknowledged and recognised within any approach going forward. There are many examples of how the existing structure of the LAG / Council has worked to bring benefits to the rural communities and businesses within the current and previous Rural Development Programmes. The programme evaluation of the outcomes of the current programme is yet to be completed and taken account of. However, the members would like to highlight the role of the Local Action Group in overseeing the role out and delivery of Programmes.

The Department's support and response to Covid is welcomed. The recent pilot schemes are focussed and specific, however with the timing of these being in the middle of a pandemic, it is difficult to fully assess their benefits. The Partnership has had no link to or involvement with these new pilot projects based on microbusinesses and digital investment, which have been delivered and implemented by central government. This approach is not necessarily the best going forward to build local rural economies. We are aware of a number of individuals who have found it difficult to gain information and guidance from the Department on these pilots.

In particular, we would like to highlight the importance of the business innovation and entrepreneurship, access to services and village renewal as themes, and are pleased to

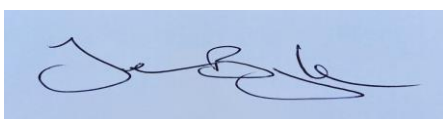
note that its concerns regarding rural transport and communication issues have been taken into account. However, it is important to note that issues such as rural broadband provision are to be undertaken at a national level. The future policy needs acknowledge and recognise that priorities, in terms of supporting access to this new infrastructure to grow local economies, will vary from region to region.

In order to achieve success and quantifiable results for the benefit of sustainable rural communities and dwellers, this policy should address the following:

- Acknowledge and adapt to the change in circumstances due to Covid and how that may now impact on the approach to business investment schemes. Capital business supports are a way of sustaining, diversifying, expanding and creating new start-up businesses to create jobs. Innovation and entrepreneurship are a niche market and the most scope for support exists within the small food business sector, which has been under supported in previous programmes. This type of support needs to be in place and delivered at a local level.
- Continue to build rural infrastructure and community assets and ensure they are fit for purpose and consider changing needs due to the new working from home environment. It needs to be acknowledged that these types of projects take time to progress, which will not be necessarily captured under a pilot scheme. This needs to be considered as part of a long-term approach by providing technical support to develop well thought out and consulted on capital schemes.
- Build on the importance of village plans which have been aligned to the principles of the Community Plan and the Council's Corporate Plan, as each integrated plan includes a detailed action plan that identifies priority projects and the responsible lead partners / stakeholders. The tidy towns model is just one approach which has been implemented in ways through Ulster in Bloom with the support of Council and local communities. There is still a need to further build on the work done under the previous Village Renewal Scheme to continue to regenerate villages to make them more sustainable and attractive. For example, environmental improvement schemes identified within current and future village plans.
- Acknowledge the role of Local Government and other local based stakeholders in programme delivery.
- Be clear from the outset the level of investment required, and provide a rolling investment method, rather than linked to programme lifecycles and financial years.

This response has been prepared and circulated to members of the LAG for comment and input.

Yours sincerely,

A blue rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be 'Joe Boyle'.

Councillor Joe Boyle,  
Chair of Ards and North Down Rural Partnership