

DAERA Presentation to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 26 November 2020.

Response from Fermanagh and Omagh Local Action Group

i. Introduction

Fermanagh and Omagh Local Action Group (FOLAG) welcome the opportunity to respond to the request to provide feedback to your correspondence of 7 December 2020 in respect of the DAERA presentation made to the Committee on 26 November 2020.

FOLAG Members would like to acknowledge the work that has been undertaken to date by DAERA in the consultations and development of the new policy strategy and framework.

The current Fermanagh & Omagh Local Action Plan has enabled significant investment in rural businesses, rural basic services, village renewal and cross border co-operation projects across the district. Members are supportive of the five pillars identified as underpinning the new policy strategy and framework, which we see as further development of the existing schemes to address the key issues impacting rural people and their communities.

Five Key Pillars

Innovation & Entrepreneurship

Members welcome the strategy to develop a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship to 'grow' the economy within our district with the aim of enhancing the prosperity of the district and increasing employment opportunities. Members are keen to encourage that every effort should be taken to strengthen existing initiatives and programmes which encourage entrepreneurship, engaging with stakeholders at scheme development stage to ensure a collaborative and efficient approach.

Programme animation and effective engagement with potential applicants will be essential to the successful roll-out of an innovation and entrepreneurship scheme.

The Covid-19 pandemic has many businesses in a survival mode which could have a long lasting impact. The FOLAG would ask DAERA to take this into account when developing this type of business support scheme.

Sustainable Tourism

Members welcome the element of Sustainable Tourism and the opportunity for further focus on the natural resources within our rural district and consider the focus on creating projects that will motivate visitors and tourists from the traditional

regional attractions to spending more time in rural areas. FOLAG are currently involved in two cross border Co-operation projects under the current programme, both of which are tourism focussed and welcome the opportunity for further funding opportunities to enhance the tourist experience in the Fermanagh & Omagh District Council area.

Members see further potential for the development of Greenways to enhance currently undeveloped land to provide wildlife corridors that can be used to promote connectivity as well as enhancing the beauty of the natural environment and promoting outdoor activity eg walking, cycling, hiking paths; which will also promote health and wellbeing.

Health & Wellbeing

The promotion of health and wellbeing is of high importance to the FOLAG and considerable work has been developed through the current and previous Rural Development Programme investing in projects that support this theme. The Village Renewal and Basic Services Schemes have seen significant in contributing to local villages and towns which have been utilised to promote the health and wellbeing of the Fermanagh & Omagh District Council residents. The FOLAG would like to ascertain if Village Renewal and Basic Services will be included in the new programme.

Employment

FOLAG support the DAERA assertion regarding the lack of employment in rural areas and are supportive of any scheme that will enhance employment opportunities in the District. We note the need to ensure our residents are appropriately skilled and have opportunity to build their personal and professional capacity in order to be able to apply for employment positions. We also support entrepreneurship as an employment option.

We note that current employability programmes are funded through the European Social Fund and the Department for the Economy and recommend a collaborative approach between Departments to ensure no duplication and to make the most of resources.

Connectivity

This is of particular importance to the FOLAG, specifically in the context of access to services and opportunities provided by digital connection.

The Council continues to lobby for a better broadband access and champions the need for the further extension of broadband access especially in relation to the needs of rural Fermanagh and Omagh District Council businesses, residents and communities. The Council has long highlighted the causes of rural disadvantage and equality in regards to the digital divide, not only within Northern Ireland (NI) but with other regions.

Statistics from OFCOM show that businesses are more dependent on telecommunications in the rural areas of NI; similarly, there is a higher uptake across

almost all facets of telecommunications amongst the rural population (Smart Phones are the only device that scores higher in urban areas).

The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017 identified the 100 most deprived SOAs according to the Access to Services Domain. 95 of the 100 most deprived SOAs are classified as rural.

The Fermanagh & Omagh District has 23 of the most deprived SOA's according to the Access to Services Domain, which accounts for 47% of its 49 SOAs; the highest proportion of all Local Government Districts; and 5 of the 10 most deprived SOAs are in Fermanagh & Omagh.

Rural transport in the district is inadequate, people living rurally with no means of private transport are at risk of isolation and being marginalised and are put at a disadvantage when considering access to essential services, employment opportunities etc, all of which impacts health and wellbeing. Whilst much of the connectivity focus is on broadband the FOLAG wish to emphasise the need for enhancement of infrastructure between rural and urban areas and to highlight the inadequacy of rural transport. Access to services is key to those living in rural areas and immediate consideration is required as to how access can be enhanced in order to reduce the level of disadvantage currently experienced by residents of rural Fermanagh & Omagh.

Additional Comments

The Fermanagh & Omagh LAG wish to note that the current LEADER Mechanism has been successful and would advocate a similar mechanism where interests are represented locally. We therefore welcome DAERA's commitment to local representation in the delivery of any new programme.

The current Rural Development Programme is due to finish on 31 March 2022 with projects to be concluded in Fermanagh & Omagh by no later than September 2021. We note that DAERA are currently piloting a number of schemes in-house. If there is to be a lag between the current programme end date and new programme start date, will consideration for extended pilots and funding be rolled out to the LAGS?

Can DAERA advise the expected commencement date of the new programme?

Recent alarming media reports headline Northern Ireland Rural Funding reductions of up to £34 million over the next 3 years. Members would welcome an update from DAERA on expected funding and any impact that this will have on the future Rural Development Programme.

Conclusion

The FOLAG as representatives of the Fermanagh & Omagh District and Communities would like to highlight the disadvantage experienced by those living in

rural areas and the need for funded programmes to support those who are hardest to reach in order to reduce rural disadvantage and inequality.

Members look forward to receiving further updates and welcome the opportunity to be involved in further consultation and provision of feedback,