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

20<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Dear Ms McArdle

**Re: Future Rural Affairs Policy Response**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Future Rural Affairs policy. GROW South Antrim Limited has delivered three Rural Development Programmes under the LEADER methodology since 2000 and welcomes the invitation to comment on the process of the new policy to date.

Firstly, GROW welcomes the new Policy and understands the requirement for it in the absence of EU funding and therefore no longer aligning programmes to European policy. Overall, Members of GROW are content with the thematic pillars and themes that have been outlined to date and welcomed the co-design process of developing the themes using a range of stakeholders. However, it is disappointing that the Policy has not progressed to full consultation yet, as we understood that following a positive stakeholder meeting in January 2020 the consultation would follow swiftly to allow the policy to progress and the programme to follow. Whilst we appreciate the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused, delays to finalising the policy will result in delays to commencement of any new programme, which will have a detrimental impact to rural areas. Investment in rural areas through public funds is critical to recovery from the pandemic and we are keen to see this Policy in place and rolled out as soon as possible.

Alongside policy development, GROW would welcome discussion on the proposed delivery of the new Policy. The LEADER methodology has been successful across the last 3 NI Rural Development Programmes and a lot of experience and knowledge has been built through the Local Action Groups. The local knowledge for promoting the schemes,

throughout the assessment process and monitoring projects has been invaluable and the role of existing local delivery structures should be acknowledged and recognised within any approach going forward. This is not currently happening through the pilot funding schemes where there has been no input from the LAG in the development or delivery of the programmes. Whilst we welcome the provision of this gap funding, we are aware of businesses who have found it difficult to obtain information on these pilots and there is limited lead in time to the call so some applicants miss the opportunity.

When considering the programme design and delivery methodology, GROW would also encourage the Department to consider the fit alongside other funding streams, in particular Shared Prosperity Fund and Peace. We are aware that SOLACE recently prepared a report on EU Successor Funds and this suggests a closer alignment of funds and priorities to deliver holistic packages of support to beneficiaries. It also considers the important role of local delivery and management of funds and outlines the experience that local authorities and LAGs bring to funding administration.

The LAG would like to see continued opportunity to deliver cooperation projects through the future Rural Policy. Over the last two programmes we have successfully delivered a Rural Youth Exchange with partners in Finland, France and Estonia and a Craft Business exchange with partners in Finland and Latvia, and both projects have reaped benefits to participants in our local area. We have also had the opportunity to cooperate locally with LAGs in Northern Ireland and we feel the opportunity for shared learning, exchanges and joint projects should continue in the future.

Finally, on behalf of the LAG I would like to encourage the Department to consider a rolling programme for investment in the Rural Policy, rather than linking to financial years or programme lifecycles. Regular reviews to delivery and adjustments to the programme to continue meeting local rural needs should be continuously carried out – rather than waiting until the end of a programme and forcing what is normally a 2-year gap between programmes. Future match funding levels in any programme should also be reviewed given the financial pressures in all sectors of rural communities arising from Covid-19 pandemic.

May I take this opportunity, on behalf of our LAG, to thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on the Future Rural Policy, and please do not hesitate to contact us for further input on the matter via [grow@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk](mailto:grow@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk)

Yours sincerely



Councillor Vera McWilliam  
Chairperson  
GROW South Antrim Limited

