



11 January 2021

FEEDBACK REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL AFFAIRS.

This report is provided in response to correspondence sent to LAG members on 2 December requesting feedback regarding the future Rural Affairs Policy and the presentation given by DAERA officials to the committee on 26th November 2020.

- 1. Delay in progressing the future Rural Affairs Policy and therefore successor funding to the current NIRDP programme**
 - a. LAG Members are keen to see the rollout of successor funding to the NIRDP as soon as possible. DAERA have determined that the rollout of the next programme of Rural Development Funding would be underpinned by the development of a new framework strategy. Throughout the stakeholder consultation process in 2019 stakeholders have been advised that the policy framework and the future funding programme(s) were interdependent. The knock on effect on the delivery of new Rural Development grant funding was the main concern of all seven of the LAG members who have provided feedback responses.
 - b. In January 2020 the rural stakeholder event in Loughry was purported to be the culmination of the Rural Stakeholder consultations that had been ongoing for all of the previous year. Attendees were told that the purpose of the event was to present the findings of the stakeholder consultations to the stakeholders for a final check. Those findings would then be released for public consultation. At that time, there was satisfaction with the progress to date, the research findings and the plan to have the public consultation in Spring 2020.
 - c. LAG members are concerned to hear in the presentation provided that resources have been redeployed within the DAERA away from this area of work and the progression of the policy framework and the future funding programme has been halted. 'The future Rural Affairs policy and the future

funding programme appears to have been mothballed by DAERA' Nelson Bryce LAG Member. "As a representative of SMEs in LCCC area (through Lisburn Enterprise Organisation) I am disappointed that there will be a 4 year funding gap. Due to the demand for funding of grants from £30,000 to £50,000 in our LAG area the funding to businesses closed in May 2018". Martina Crawford, LAG Member. All of the LAG members who have submitted a response have expressed concern that no action is being taken to progress with the public consultations which were supposedly imminent. The responses express deep disappointment and in some cases frustration.

- d. Most LAG members stated that the COVID pandemic is not an acceptable justification for not proceeding with this important work. Other public consultations have taken place in spite of the current restrictions. The obvious solution proposed is to have the consultation online.
- e. The need for the future funding programme to be underpinned by a new rural affairs policy was queried by some LAG Members. Funding programmes are designed and rolled out as a matter of course. The experience of the last three LEADER programmes in DAERA, community volunteers and Council admin units should ease this process. 'Systems and processes are not new so the machine is well oiled and good to go. In fact many other small grants such as TRPSI rolled out very quickly last year so we know it can be done'. Lynne McCabe LAG Member.

2. Need for support for the Rural Business Community in the LRP area.

- a. Three of our Social Partners and two elected members have expressed deep concern for the impact this will have on businesses in the LRP area. Our LAG members represent the business, Community and farming sectors in this rural area. Lynne McCabe who is a local representative from the business community and runs a number of rural businesses stated that it was important for committee members to note that the last call for local businesses to apply for the Rural Business funding from NIRDP here in the LRP area closed in May 2018; as the demand in our area exhausted the funding allocation LRP were given at that point. During the presentation a 'funding gap for businesses of two years' is referred to when describing the timescales between current and future RDP funding. It is important to note that in this area the gap between funding programmes for rural businesses here is already 2 years, 8 months and counting. This need for action to support local businesses without further delay was reiterated by Martina Crawford and Councillor Uel Mackin also LAG Members.
- b. Both Lynne McCabe and another of the Social Partners pointed to the disparity between the large scale funding investments seen under this NIRDP programme for rural businesses and other available forms of support mentioned at the presentation to your committee such as TRPSI and Revitalisation funding. Grants of up to £50,000 were available to businesses in this area and have seen the creation of 81 jobs in this area

alone. The Rural Business Investment scheme element of this programme has a funding pot of £27 million and has created nearly 1000 jobs in rural Northern Ireland so far. It cannot be compared with a £1million Pilot Scheme or any of the smaller grant schemes, although those are welcome. 'The success of the rural development fund with circa 80 jobs and results that showed a real punch are what is needed more than ever due to the pandemic' Lynne McCabe LAG Member. 'Working at a strategic level in Credit Unions across the whole of Northern Ireland it is clear to me that there is a great appetite for Rural business growth with proper support but this support needs to come without delay. It also needs to be at the right level the TRPSI at £5k does not replace the RBIS grants of £30k -£50k. The support needs to be at a level to make a material difference to a growth business and employment' Martin Busch LAG Member

3. Positive Outcomes

Our LAG members also expressed their appreciation for the funding and the impact it has had in our area, for villages, businesses and community groups. The capacity to strengthen businesses and create employment are repeatedly positively referenced in the responses from our LAG members. 'It has been wonderful to witness grant beneficiaries being encouraged to grow and develop as a result of this funding' Nessa O'Callaghan Vice Chair

4. Future Uncertainty

At the presentation DAERA Officials are asked about the community structures such as the LAG Boards which are in place and the need to retain that expertise for the future. It should be noted that the delay in rolling out a future programme in Spring 2021 as projected at the time of the Rural Stakeholder Event in Loughry in January 2020 means that the clock has been wound down on the existing LAG groups. The administration funding which supports our operation has been fully utilised at this point and DAERA have declined to provide further funding. Numerous LAGs Boards will close and staff within the administration units will lose their jobs or be redeployed within Councils. Lagan Rural Partnership has extended its period of operation from 30 December 2020 to 31 July 2021 to enable the last remaining projects delayed by COVID to complete. This period of operation will be funded at full cost to the lead Council. It will then close. Our Vice-chair stated 'You are right to commend the achievements of the LAGs, I consider it a privilege to be part of the Lagan Rural Partnership LAG Group. Thanks to the expertise and commitment of this team much has been achieved in the rural areas' Mrs O'Callaghan went on to lament the forthcoming closure of the LAG and admin unit especially given the success it has achieved and the fact that funding here was delivered as far as possible within the given timeframe of the NIRDP programme 2014 - 2020. Similar feedback was received from Martina Crawford who expressed concern at the loss of expertise within both the LAG membership and the admin team, both

groups have undertaken significant training and have long experience of supporting funded projects.

Summary

As the Manager of the LAG admin unit I would also add that we would have undertaken a role in the delivery of the Growth Pilot programme had our support been requested, we have more than 10 years' experience in delivering DAERA funded programmes for businesses such as NIRDP and more recently TRPSI. The pilot is relatively small in scale with a budget of £1m and 27 businesses to support. This would have allowed DAERA teams progressing the policy and the new programme to continue that important work.

The LAG Group were grateful for the opportunity to express their views and made many positive comments about the impact the NIRDP 2014 -2020 funding has brought for this area. The findings as presented to rural stakeholders at the Final Stakeholder Consultation event in January 2020 were well received and no concerns have been raised by LAG members with any of the content of the policy framework as presented at that time. The members are deeply concerned by the delay in rolling out the policy framework and subsequently the next Rural Development Funding programme. The interdependence of the two is questioned by some LAG members particularly when faced with clear needs for financial assistance in our business and rural communities at this time. The implications of that delay for local beneficiaries and the LAG structures have been the key themes of the feedback we have received. LAG members volunteer their time and expertise in order to support local business, community and farming sectors. The implications of the delay in the face of clear and demonstrable needs in our rural communities is keenly felt by our LAG members.

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