

12th 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

Mid and East Antrim Local Action Group (LAG), welcome the opportunity to respond to the future Rural Affairs Policy.

The LAG in itself is a fully inclusive and representative body comprising of both councillors and social partners where decisions are taken to progress projects that address rural issues and needs. There is a wealth of knowledge on the group with individuals and organisations who have unquestioned expertise in diverse aspects of rural life and development.

The development of a future Rural Affairs Policy is timely in one way with regard to BREXIT and the end of specific initiatives such as LEADER. It is particularly disappointing that although this work commenced some time back, it has only progressed to this point and has some way to travel regarding further public consultation.

Mid and East Antrim Local Action Group broadly welcomes the thematic pillars of the framework and agrees with the key themes as overall priorities. It is crucial to highlight the importance of business innovation and entrepreneurship, access to services and village renewal as themes. Rural transport needs and communication issues cannot be over-emphasised as is also the case with the provision of rural broadband. Programmes such as Project stratum is a very welcome national scheme and it is hoped will bring major improvement to connectivity across the province. The development of these priorities within a future rural policy is essential with a needs based support system that will allow for targeted interventions meeting the specific requirements of different localities. A focus on developing the rural infrastructure will have a very positive effect on the growth of local economies.

Delivery should be through the existing local delivery structures as there has been great benefit from the existing structure of the LAG / Council partnership approach not just in this programme but previous Rural Development Programmes also. The recent pilot schemes through the Department have been focussed and specific and welcome to many businesses. Locally there has been had no involvement with these new pilot projects which

have been delivered and implemented through central government primarily. This approach is not necessarily the best going forward. A local presence is often required in engaging with businesses. Through the various channels available within Council this has led to a better uptake. The Department lacks that local presence.

A future Rural Policy must address the following points:

- Recognise the challenges and impact Covid-19 has heralded on rural businesses
- Capital business support for sustaining, diversifying, expanding and creating new start-up businesses and overall job creation
- Innovation and entrepreneurship are key factors in upcoming or niche markets. This is particularly prevalent in the food sector. This support needs to be localised, a major failing of the last programme was the inability for food businesses to get support.
- Continue to see benefit and develop community assets. Pilot schemes don't work in this area as they are generally short term. The nature of this development requires time not just for community buy in and scope development but the overall technical requirements.
- 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 identifies priority projects and the responsible lead partners / stakeholders. 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.

Lastly, it is essential that the role of Local Government and other local based stakeholders is recognised and acknowledged in programme delivery. Furthermore in previous times, Council were key match funding bodies in delivering programmes. In the changing funding environment, Councils are under pressure financially but still recognise the value for money that can be attributed to partnership working. However a rolling investment method would be best suited for this programme, with clear information on the levels of investment required from early inception.

There is no doubt that past programmes have delivered a great deal but there is continued work to be done to give rural communities confidence and parity in what they can achieve. We wish the Department well with their plans and hope to continue to be a chosen delivery mechanism going forward.

Yours sincerely



Mrs Kelli McRoberts
Chair
Mid and East Antrim LAG