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20/01/2021

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

Firstly we thank the Committee for this opportunity to comment on the Rural Affairs Policy and progress to date.

Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership is a fully inclusive and representative body comprising of both Councillors and social partners from the Mid Ulster Council area. 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.

We welcome the development of a future Rural Affairs Policy particularly in the context of the EU exit and the impending cessation of EU support initiatives, such as LEADER. While we acknowledge the progress made to date as outlined by DAERA officials in their presentation to the Committee, I'm sure we all share concern regarding any potential gap in transition from the current EU funded RDP to a new rural support programme. The impact of COVID 19 will continue to hit our rural communities hard and the need to offer support to the rural economy has never been greater. We acknowledge the support provided from the Department to date but it is now imperative to move forward with the roll out of mainstream initiatives planned under the new rural policy framework as soon as possible following conclusion of the public consultation exercise. Wider public consultation is a vital part of this process which has yet to commence. We acknowledge that COVID has played its part in delaying this process and while stakeholder consultation has been ongoing, we believe the public consultation exercise should be rolled out as soon as possible.

In relation to the current status of the new rural policy and the evidence presented to the Committee, MURDP broadly welcomes the thematic pillars identified and while in agreement with the key themes and overall priorities would raise the following points in relation the evidence provided by the DAERA officials:

- In terms of delivery we accept the need for the most effective delivery structure to be taken forward but strongly contend that this should be via local delivery. There are many examples of how the existing LAG / Council partnership has worked to bring benefits to the rural communities and businesses within the current and previous Rural Development Programmes. The programme evaluation and outcomes of the current programme is yet to be completed and taken account of.
- The micro business pilot schemes referred to by the officials have been developed and delivered centrally in an early attempt to test some of the assumptions coming from the working groups. We would be concerned if this trend in delivery was to continue. The benefit of local knowledge in the delivery of support to the rural economy can't be underestimated.
- In relation to support for the rural business sector, we believe this is critical for growing the rural economy. Mid Ulster has a large concentration of rural businesses particularly within manufacturing and engineering sectors and there was huge demand under our Rural Business Development Scheme. We would support the need to encourage a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. We would however emphasise that the **availability of capital support** to rural businesses will remain an important ingredient in enabling innovation and entrepreneurship and should form an integral part of whatever support programme is agreed going forward. Capacity building combined with capital assistance we feel is the best approach to follow in order to grow the rural economy.
- Investment in our rural towns and villages must continue therefore we welcome the planned inclusion of this under the tourism theme which will build on the good work done under the current and previous Village Renewal Schemes. The village planning process was a means of involving rural communities in identifying local priorities to take forward and this should continue for future regeneration activities.
- A focus on ensuring existing community infrastructure is fit for purpose is a welcomed direction. We would recommend the inclusion of some form of technical support to assist with the design and planning phase of refurbishment projects which can in itself be costly. Isolation remains an issue within rural areas and community hubs can provide an outlet for activities to tackle this and improve social well-being - but this demands facilities which are accessible for all and which provide a comfortable environment for intended usage.

- We welcome the approach proposed for rural connectivity. Broadband is rightly placed as a priority under this theme and we look forward to the roll out of Project Stratum in rural areas of Mid Ulster. We agree that connectivity issues extend beyond digital in rural areas. Gaps in public transport and access to health and social care services contribute to the connectivity issue so also need be addressed.
- On the issue of financing future rural support initiatives in the absence of EU contributions, we would stress that the budget needs to be at least on a par with the current programme in order to build on what has been achieved to date. It is also important that funding is made available in multi-year cycles instead of annually to give the flexibility needed for planned delivery. We acknowledge the efforts outlined by the officials in bidding for future funding but would share concerns with the lack of progress with the UK Sustainable Prosperity Fund as the replacement to EU structural funds and the uncertainty surrounding where this fund will be administered from.

We again thank the Committee for this opportunity to comment and look forward to the opportunity of further engagement on the new Rural Affairs Policy through input to the public consultation when launched. Thereafter we would hope that local stakeholder involvement in the final design and delivery of rural support initiatives will continue.

As always we are available to offer whatever assistance we can.

Yours sincerely



Conor Corr
Chairperson of Mid Ulster Rural Development Partnership