

## FEEDBACK ON RURAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

NI Assembly Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee had requested LAGs feedback on evidence presented by DAERA on the new Rural Policy Framework.

Below is a brief summary of the main points presented by DAERA Officials, Rural Community Network, The Rural Women's Network & Rural Action on 26<sup>th</sup> Nov 2020.

SOAR (ABC) LAG members were asked for their feedback on the future rural framework and had a Zoom meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 to provide comments which is captured below.

This is to be returned to NI Assembly AERA Committee by 13<sup>th</sup> Jan 2021.

DAERA	
5 Thematic Pillars discussed;	LAG Comments
1. <b>Innovation &amp; Entrepreneurship.</b> This should not be limited to grants. Should be at core of all business. Need to develop a culture of innovation. Want to grow an economy which is just not focussed on grants but takes in wider ethos of entrepreneurship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fantastic entrepreneurship in ABC rural areas. Need for capacity building/mentoring to assist new start ups</li><li>• In reality we have more innovation than real entrepreneurship in the area. We should be pitching in a different way, looking for new business ideas from community and review them on merit/value. Instead of giving out grants just for the ideas, we should look at idea of getting % stake in the business, dragon den style.</li><li>• Would rather see business try new ideas and fail than not try at all, we should be facilitating the opportunity for businesses to try these new ideas.</li><li>• What's missing from the evidence is that often landlord's terms and conditions aren't flexible for small start up's in rural areas. Opportunities to intervene to provide less risk options for business units and workspace in rural areas</li><li>• Concern over "not be limited to grants" Grants are capital injection business needs to innovate, Any support programme needs to offer</li></ul>

	<p>both grants and capacity building / mentoring support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't always need to hand cheques, it can be pointing people in the right direction for advice and assistance.</li> <li>• If we are moving towards a culture of working from home due to the current situation of covid where or who will provide work space? If people aren't going to cities or large towns every day for work like they normally would, and are instead working from home, people might then spend locally in rural areas. This highlights not just need for entrepreneurship in rural areas, but community spirit and integration as well.</li> <li>• Big issue regarding working from home in rural areas is poor internet connection. This is a main priority.</li> </ul>
<p>2. <b>Rural Tourism.</b> Move away from smaller grants. Look wider and increase the footfall which will then generate wealth in rural economy. Support amenities which encourage visitors to come and stay in areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Derelict buildings should be brought back into suitable use. We have visitors coming to the area for the likes of Game of Thrones attraction, these tourists need places to stay. Old buildings like these should be converted for accommodation.</li> <li>• Accommodation is limited outside of hotels. We should be helping to facilitate renovation of alternative accommodation to get people into the area, as a rural community we are missing this opportunity. Need to create a range of accommodation facilities.</li> <li>• We underestimate the interest people have in our rural areas, when we compare them to tourism in rural areas of other parts of the UK/Ireland.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Still need grants for small tourist attractions so people still have activities to do when they visit.</li> <li>• Mobile-home use for tourism is a big attraction but parking is an issue that needs developed.</li> <li>• Fishing is a popular sport on the island and should be looked at as a tourist attraction.</li> <li>• Also need to highlight the importance of blue ways and green ways</li> <li>• We need to avoid duplication when it comes to funding to avoid any wastage of time / valuable resources</li> </ul>
<p>3. <b>Social Wellbeing.</b> Isolation and exclusion has been exacerbated by Covid. Mental wellbeing important. Rural champion role. Rural infrastructure and community assets need to be fit for purpose, Utilise what is already there. Living landscapes / heart of village</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health crisis, worsened by covid 19. Many examples of cases where covid restrictions have made existing mental health issues even tougher e.g. rural isolation, lack of contact between people, fear of breaking rules/guidelines. Raises the issue of strain on counselling services, up to 6+ weeks for appointments. Real need for a boost in community spirit at the moment.</li> <li>• Lockdown has made situation worse, especially with bad weather now coming into the mix in current restrictions.</li> <li>• Community groups and Rural Networks need to be provided with more support to help rural communities. Highlights the need for transport links to be improved. A massive collective effort is needed now and past covid.</li> <li>• Example of community garden group in Donaghcloney. The human and social interaction that comes from these groups really improves social well being.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be looking at this within covid but also on past covid as well. Raises the issue that we need to correctly identify the people who need help the most. Argues that often the people who need help the most are the hardest to find. Need to work alongside GP's to help identify those in need.</li> <li>• There is an appetite in the rural community for more social engagement, if events are put on people will attend.</li> <li>• Places of worship need encouraged to get out into the community and help as much as possible.</li> <li>• Data protection needs considered when identifying who needs help</li> </ul>
<p>4. <b>Employment.</b> Develop basic skills and capacity. Ensure rural dwellers can apply for jobs on a level playing field. Encourage development of own business which creates local employment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples of businesses who have benefited from previous RDP programme's grant and are now employing 50 staff, shows how initial SOAR grant helped. Although also has seen examples of businesses where they are laying off employee's and also examples of businesses where they are looking to recruit but cannot find people with the desired skills. Thinks schools should broaden focus towards training for skills and trades.</li> <li>• Need to work with colleges and provide linkages to employers with skill shortages. Education and businesses need a more joined up approach</li> <li>• Example of businesses who are crying out for skilled workers such as welders but are struggling to find people with the desired skill set. Potentially need to re-skill people.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shocked at the cost of training employees in the conventional way, proposes we look at virtual or simulation training for trades.</li> </ul>
<p>5. <b>Connectivity.</b> Wider than just rural broadband. Includes rural transport. Connectivity between rural and urban.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Major issue of factory's electricity capacity at peak times and battery storage. Looking at a big increase in demand for electricity in the future i.e. demand for electric cars</li> <li>Lack of electric recharge points for cars in rural areas. If more were installed it would bring people into the rural areas. We must avoid situation where travel is moved to electric cars but we do not have enough charging points.</li> <li>There are firms willing and able to put these charging points in, although at a cost. Raises the point that charging units can be having as much electric usage as 20 households.</li> <li>Existing businesses will change to provide electric i.e. petrol stations will move to providing charging points. Concern over whether rural areas have adequate charging points as this could reduce already vital transport links. Could lead to more rural isolation.</li> <li>Covid has highlighted the importance of rural transport links even more and also the importance of green energy e.g. hydrogen.</li> <li>Raises issue of active travel within rural communities and also decline in rural services. How do residents access banking, libraries etc?</li> <li>The removal of bank buildings in rural towns has negatively affected those who are unable to switch to online banking</li> </ul>

<p><b>Pilot Schemes.</b> Introduced due to Covid pressure/Brexit round the corner/avoid gap in new programme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rural Micro Growth Scheme</li> <li>- Tourism Website Development Scheme</li> <li>- Rural Social Economy Scheme</li> </ul> <p>Planned pilots</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Micro Food Investment Scheme (50% local ingredients required / Minister launch in Dec 20 to allow business to prepare / consider guidance before applications requested in early new year)</li> <li>- Micro Business Digital Investment</li> <li>- Micro Business Web Development Scheme</li> </ul> <p>Final two to enable benefits of project stratum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disappointed at the lack of cooperation with LAGs in roll out of pilot schemes</li> <li>• Instead of a micro business web development scheme there should be a focus on app's instead of websites as app's are now more readily used by people.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Final Draft of Programme</b> – brought to NI Assembly early in New Year. Strong case developed for budget to invest in rural communities. New programme consultation should be on Citizen Space in New Year for 8 weeks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disappointed at delay in programme</li> </ul>
<p><b>Co-operation.</b> There is an over-arching principle of co-operation. DAERA working with PEACE Plus to look at cross border.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further details about cooperation should be provided given NI protocol on and ongoing relationship with EU.</li> <li>• Good to see DAERA working with Peace Plus</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEADER/Future of LAGs.</b> This was requirement of EU – not required in new framework. However DAERA have seen benefit of local needs solutions. Too early to say about implementation structures but looking at Community Planning Partnerships. Keen that local people to continue to be involved in local decisions as worked well in past.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for LEADER approach. A bottom up approach should continue.</li> <li>• Vital we have rural stakeholder voice heard and involved.</li> <li>• Shame to do away with the good work that has been done by LAGs if there is to be a move towards community planning partnerships. These partnerships are much bigger and if rural programme moved to this structure it would dilute some of the good work that has been done already.</li> <li>• Lot of LAG members been involved in many LEADER programmes. Don't see any reason for major change in approach/structure, room for improvement yes, but no need to make drastic changes.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rural projects should be delivered by rural people who have local knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Planning / Local Development Plans.</b> Issues with planning need to be addressed so this does not hinder progress of projects supported by new rural framework. Working with Councils / other govt depts.	Agreed.
<b>Revitalisation of Existing Projects.</b> Key focus on programme going forward and could be a pilot on this in near future.	Agreed.
<b>Social Enterprise Sustainability.</b> Sustainability following grant challenging. Need to build capacity into programme / process. Programme may look at Micro business development groups – building skills in areas such as accounts / supply chain dev / mentoring	Agreed.
<b>Rural Community Network</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Issues with match funding and organisation status acted as a barrier to a lot of community group's involvement in current programme. Keen that new programme more open to all.</li> <li>Avoid gap in programme</li> <li>Budget should be similar to what agreed when EU part of programme.</li> </ul>	Agreed.
<b>Womens Network</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retain local input into local decision making. Ensure that within the structures women are involved. Young people remain to be under represented as well as women.</li> <li>Cross border element important</li> <li>Stakeholders should be both co-designers and involved in implementation</li> <li>Equality principles should be at forefront and not forgotten when pressure of time/spend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some members do not agree with gender quotas for the sake of it. Prefers an emphasis on merit instead.</li> </ul>
<b>Rural Action</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broadband and connectivity vital</li> <li>Need to move away from annual budgets and look at programme longevity</li> <li>Less restrictions surrounding capital and revenue</li> <li>Risk/ innovation should be allowed to ensure flexibility to encourage innovation</li> <li>Programme animation. Get communities ready now and provide development support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look at projects that are less developed /at an early stage, this comes with added risk, but the benefits that come from the projects that work will greatly outweigh the negatives that come from projects that fail.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Would like to see projects being pitched in person as well as a written submission. Allows for a chance to get to see people in person and get a real feel of the project. This could be looked at through the assessment process.</li></ul>
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