

Title of Report: New Rural Policy Framework	Officer presenting: Head of Business Author: Rural Development Programme Manager
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1 Purpose of Report/Recommendations

- 1.1 To update Members on the timescale and process for the new Rural Policy Framework which will replace the current Rural Development Programme.

2 Background

- 2.1 The NI Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the European Union. Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership (LAG) was established in 2015 to deliver the LEADER elements (Priority 6) of the Rural Development Programme with an allocation of £7.5 million. Derry City and Strabane District Council provide administrative support services with a current team of five staff. The programme includes the following schemes:

- Rural Business Investment Scheme
- Rural Basic Services Scheme
- Rural Cooperation Scheme
- Village Renewal Scheme

- 2.2 The Programme is coming towards an end with all its funding committed and all projects to be completed and paid by March 2021. DAERA is currently scoping a successor programme, which due to the UK's Exit from Europe, will no longer require the EU 'LEADER' mandatory elements of the current programme. This includes for example, the 'LAG' boards and inter-LAG cooperation measures.

3 Key Issues

- 3.1 DAERA commenced the process of a new Rural Policy Framework in 2019, establishing working groups under the following five pillars/draft policy objectives to feed into the drafting of the policy framework document:

- *Innovation & Entrepreneurship* - to create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish (small & micro businesses);
 - *Rural Tourism* - to maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment;
 - *Social Wellbeing* - to reduce loneliness and social exclusion, minimise impacts of rural isolation and promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers;
 - *Employment* - to increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas;
 - *Connectivity*- to improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.
- 3.2 The five working groups met during the period June to December 2019 with findings disseminated at a stakeholder event in January 2020. Feedback from the event was incorporated into 5 working group reports for completion in March 2020 – to be then developed into one overall framework for public consultation in Summer 2020. Due to Covid-19 this process was delayed.
- 3.3. DAERA advised in August 2020 that a first draft of the new Rural Policy Framework was now with the DAERA Minister for pre consultation approval. Once approved, given Covid-19, the department will issue it as an online consultation which will include a number of webinars with Q & As.
- 3.4 Once the consultation is complete, a final version of the framework that takes account of consultation feedback, will be presented to the DAERA Minister for approval. Work will then commence on drafting the new '*Rural Business and Community Investment Programme*' – to follow on from the current Rural Development Programme. This will involve designing new schemes and examining delivery structures/methods – with an expectation that the new programme will be in place for summer 2021.
- 3.5 DAERA is launching a number of small pilot schemes over the next number of months to help inform the programme drafting. Some of these have already been launched and include, for example, under the business and tourism pillars:
- *Website Development Programme* – in collaboration with Tourism NI to assist tourism experience providers to create a new or enhance an existing website (deadline 21st August 2020).
 - *Rural Micro Business Growth Scheme* - up to £40k of grant available to invest in innovation and new technologies which will improve efficiency/ productivity or create growth in rural economy (deadline 31st August 2020).
 - *Micro Food Business Investment Scheme* - up to £40-50k of grant available for micro food and drink businesses to invest in equipment and new technology to increase productivity and support the use of raw materials produced in NI.

- *Rural Tourism Collaborative Experiences Scheme* - a resource grant to local Councils to identify participants who will collaborate together to develop and deliver comprehensive tourism experiences in rural areas.

4 Financial, Equality, Legal, HR, Improvement, Rural Needs and other Implications

- 4.1 The current NI Rural Development Programme is funded by DAERA and the EU. The Rural Development team of five staff are 100% funded by the programme and have contracts until March 2021.
- 4.2 There is no indication at this stage as to whether Councils will be engaged to administer any of the future programme/schemes or whether LAG Boards will be retained as part of the decision-making structure - this will be subject of the proposed consultation to take place over the coming months.

5 Recommendations

- 5.1 Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

Background Papers

None