



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and  
Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Future Rural Development Strategy: DAERA  
Briefing

26 November 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Future Rural Development Strategy: DAERA Briefing

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### **Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)  
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Clare Bailey  
Mrs Rosemary Barton  
Mr John Blair  
Mr Maurice Bradley  
Mr Harry Harvey  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Patsy McGlone

### **Witnesses:**

Mr Paul Donnelly	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Gareth Evans	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Fiona McCandless	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I welcome via StarLeaf Paul Donnelly, director of rural affairs; Gareth Evans, LEADER and rural tourism and implementation manager; and Fiona McCandless, deputy secretary. I invite you to commence your briefing, and we will take some questions afterwards.

**Ms Fiona McCandless (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you very much, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to provide the Committee with an update on the work relating to the development of the future rural policy framework. As you say, I am in the company of Paul Donnelly and Gareth Evans, who has been leading the work on development of the framework; hopefully, we will get to hear from them. You will already have received some written briefing on the matter from the Department's liaison officer, and hopefully you found that useful.

As you will be aware, the key rural policy driver for the past almost 30 years has been set by the EU rural development funding programmes. It is currently funded from pillar 2 of the EU common agricultural policy. Priority 6 of the current rural development programme (RDP) from 2014 to 2020 provides general support for rural communities to tackle poverty and isolation and support economic development. Priority 6 is more commonly known as the LEADER programme. It is an EU-supported, bottom-up delivery mechanism seeking local input to inform and animate community involvement in the identification of local issues and needs. The current LEADER programme provides investment support of £70 million and is delivered by the local action groups in 10 of the council areas; it excludes Belfast. LEADER primarily provides investment support for job creation in rural business, provision of rural basic services, village renewal plans and cooperation activities. A further £10 million is available

to support rural tourism, managed by DAERA in partnership with local government and statutory bodies.

LEADER continues to make a very positive contribution to the economic and social sectors in rural areas. Just over £60 million of funding was made available for business and community-focused projects. In particular, the rural business investment scheme has been contributing to the rural economy and successfully improving economic outcomes for people in these areas through increased employment opportunities. Under the business scheme, local action groups have issued letters of offer to the value of £21 million, leveraging in just over £23 million in private sector match-funding, with 898 full-time equivalent jobs being created. We also have the rural tourism budget of £10 million, creating innovative visitor attractions in rural areas to encourage out-of-state visitors. To date, we have had 15 projects approved and receiving total funding of £7.35 million. These include Colin Glen alpine toboggan, Davagh Forest Dark Sky Park and Observatory, Gosford forest play park trail, Ballycopeland windmill, Castlewellan Arboretum and Hillsborough forest digital sculpture trail.

In view of EU exit and the impending cessation of EU-supported initiatives such as LEADER, rural affairs division has been taking forward work to develop the new rural policy framework, which will help to inform much-needed support for rural communities and consider future interventions to support rural development post EU exit. Significant stakeholder engagement has taken place in relation to this. Five working groups have been established around the following thematic pillars: innovation and entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, health and well-being, employment and connectivity. Gareth is going to give you some more detail on the development work and engagement that has been taken forward to date. Before that, I want to comment on the impact that COVID has had on our progression of the work and our approach to rural policy going forward.

The European Commission has extended the current LEADER and tourism schemes until 2023. That has provided very welcome relief to delivery partners, given the impact of COVID on construction and service delivery. This extension has also provided staff with the space to take forward very pressing work to support rural communities. Since the onset of COVID, rural affairs division has focused resources to support rural communities and businesses to respond and recover from the impact of the restrictions on how people live. We have prioritised getting funding on the ground and, since April, almost £13 million of grant funding has been paid to rural businesses and rural communities from the rural development programme. That has played a key role in maintaining community and business sustainability so that rural areas are well placed to recover strongly from the pandemic.

In addition, rural affairs staff have worked closely with delivery partners on the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme to support the most vulnerable rural dwellers. This year, the Minister secured a budget of £10.8 million for TRPSI. That has played a key role in supporting rural individuals, communities and businesses to respond. We have done things like provide access to food, transport, telephony support, medicine, and health and well-being services. More recently, support schemes have been launched to support rural community groups and businesses to make capital adaptations to their facilities, enabling them to function and adhere to the COVID restrictions. That includes a provision of £2 million to the council-led revitalisation scheme to support rural settlements. We have over 20 initiatives under way as part of the TRPSI programme.

Although COVID has delayed the rural policy framework to some extent, it has provided the opportunity to further test assumptions from the policy development work and, very importantly, to assist COVID recovery. This has been achieved through rural affairs division's launching a number of pilot schemes since March. Gareth will give you some more detail on those. They include the rural business micro growth scheme, the web development scheme, the rural tourism collaborative experience programme and the rural social economy investment scheme. These pilots have helped us to respond to COVID but also, importantly, they provide valuable insight into what the rural needs are and to help our approach to the policy framework that is necessary to support sustainable rural communities and businesses going forward. The first draft is nearing completion, with the exception of integrating the evidence from the pilot schemes; this will be added shortly. I hope to return soon to update you on the plans for public consultation.

By way of background and for an update on the policy framework, I would like to hand over to Gareth, who will talk you through the document that we have supplied. We will be happy to take any questions following Gareth's briefing. Thank you, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** OK, Fiona.

**Mr Gareth Evans (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** We have put the document forward. You can either try to follow through the pages or, if you are happy enough, just listen in; it is up to you. The first thing that I will say is that I have been in rural development for 19 years, and we have never undertaken a piece of work like this before. It shows the seriousness that the Department puts on rural development, and particularly on rural communities and keeping them sustainable. At the very outset, we agreed that we would develop a rural policy framework. The framework is basically designed around five thematic pillars. Under each thematic pillar, there are a number of priority areas for intervention. These are what we wanted to research and then develop. We particularly wanted to research the need under each of them. Once we have that in the framework, we will develop individual schemes to address individual need under those priority areas of intervention. Further down the line, we will be looking next year at developing those into a programme. By way of a progress update, we have a slide that shows our progress to date. Before we look at each of the pillars, we will quickly run through that.

In November 2018, the Rural Development Council (RDC), or Rural Action, as it is now, held a rural stakeholder event in Loughry where it brought in many rural stakeholders to get their opinions on what rural development should look like in the future. Out of that, the Department recognised the need for an individual piece of work to take that forward. That is where the first inkling of these five thematic pillars appeared. On the back of that event, the Department formed a project board made up of representatives from across all the Departments. The project board took the five thematic pillars and did a bit of work around those. To keep stakeholders on board, we then formed a rural society stakeholder forum. That was drawn from people who were at the RDC event in November. That forum met a couple of times and then, in April 2019, we agreed the five thematic pillars and the approach that we would take to developing them further. The agreement was that, for each pillar, we would form a working group made up of departmental officials, other agencies, Departments and, most importantly, rural stakeholders. We established those five groups. Each was chaired by a member of staff from rural affairs division, and we picked staff who were experienced in delivering programmes and projects. However, I emphasise that their role was only to chair the meetings; the input really came from the members of the working groups. Each working group was tasked with going off and producing a report, and, when they eventually came in, those reports formed the basis of the framework. To keep everybody up to date during the process, the board was supplied with highlight reports showing progress as we worked our way through.

Round about November or December last year, the final reports were submitted by each of the working groups and were collated by ourselves. Even before we started drafting the framework, we decided that it was worth letting rural stakeholders have a view of the information that had come in. We had an event in Loughry in January, and I know that some of the members of the Committee attended that. We had 124 stakeholders at the event, which totally took us back; we thought that, if we got 50 or 60, we would be doing well. We were extremely pleased to get 124. Each working group gave a presentation on what they had done and more or less what their findings were at that point. Everybody at the event was given the opportunity to sit down and discuss each of the presentations. From that, we took away some comments. As a member of staff involved in this, we were surprised at how well people responded to what we presented on the day. My lasting memory of the day was that everybody was extremely happy with what we were doing, but everybody flagged up that the one major rural issue was rural broadband, and that was agreed by everybody at the meeting.

We took the reports away from that meeting, we took some more comments from each of the discussion groups at the event, and we started to work on the framework. To be honest, we made fairly good ground through February and March, and then the inevitable happened. As everybody knows, COVID kicked in. That severely impacted our work, because it restricted our ability to go out and discuss, face to face, some of the findings of the working groups. More importantly, it put a lot of pressure on the Department to start responding to COVID, so we did have to start moving some of our resources around. However, it also gave us the opportunity to test some of the assumptions that were coming out of the working groups. With ministerial approval, we very quickly made a decision to start actually developing some pilot schemes to test the assumptions that we had developed from the working groups. We put a number of pilot schemes together, some of which have already launched. The aim was to get some funding to rural businesses and communities and to take the opportunity to test the assumptions coming out of the working groups.

To go back to the membership, there is one key point that I would like to get across. We really cast the net far and wide when we were trying to form the working groups. We did not go out just to tick a box and pluck a couple of people from the rural communities and put them into the group. There are a couple of slides that give a breakdown of the organisations that we had under each of the working group themes. We had people like Invest NI, community groups such as the Rural Area Partnership in

Derry (RAPID) who have been involved with rural funding for many years, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network — there is a list there. Overall, we think that we had over 20 organisations represented. We held over 24 face-to-face meetings across the five working groups. We also had a number of Departments, local authorities and, importantly, local action groups, all of which were also represented on the working groups.

To give you a bit of a flavour of what the working groups were looking at and a high-level overview of some of the main things that came out what they did, working group one looked at innovation and entrepreneurship. I attended a couple of meetings of this group as an observer, which was quite interesting, and one of the key things that came across from the stakeholders was that we needed to start doing things differently; that simply handing grants out to businesses was not the best way to develop those businesses and make them sustainable. One of the key things if we want to grow our rural economy is to look at innovation and entrepreneurship, and that should be at the core of anything we do under business. That was the main theme that came out of that working group. There were three different areas came out that they thought should be prioritised for intervention. The main overarching issue was that we should try to develop a culture of innovation and raise awareness around entrepreneurship, because only by doing that will we grow the economy. If we simply just keep giving funding out to businesses to go from one year to the next, we will not grow the economy. It is only by growing the economy that we will increase jobs and wealth within rural areas.

Working group two looked at rural tourism. For many years, the Department has been criticised for providing funding for rural tourism. Probably, at first glance, it does not sit well with the Department, because we are not a tourism Department. However, one of the key findings from this group was that some of the funding that we have been developing, particularly in the last programme, is starting to make a significant difference — instead of looking at small bit-piece rural tourism projects, taking it up a level to where we can fairly dramatically increase the numbers of people coming into an area and to hopefully get the spin-off to businesses within that area. That was reinforced by the working group. It felt that some of the key interventions will have to be that we need to look at high-quality, sustainable tourism and unique experiences. It is not about creating Titanic Belfast or the Giant's Causeway, but we need to create projects that can challenge those and bring people out and perhaps away from the Giant's Causeway to spend an extra day somewhere inland. It was very much that case that what the Department is doing on rural tourism is not far off the mark, but we maybe need to refocus slightly.

Also on tourism, there was an opinion that rural communities need to get more involved in tourism as communities. One of the interesting things that was raised was tidy towns. We do not do that in Northern Ireland, but I am sitting here in Donegal at the minute, and it is very prevalent here. It came out of the working group that things like tidy towns involve and enhance the local communities, but they also them more attractive to tourists. We will probably need to start looking at things such as that. We also need to look at how we can maintain our built heritage and not forget about our natural and cultural environment. Those are things that many overseas visitors come to see.

Probably the biggest area, and certainly the one in which the most work was contributed, was social well-being. The headings under that thematic pillar of social isolation, exclusion and health and well-being have always been around, but this work allowed us to refocus on them. Particularly on the back of COVID, those issues have come to the fore. The working group looked at a number of priority areas and, needless to say, it probably came up with more areas for priority intervention than anybody else. One of the key things to come out was that DAERA has a very important role as a rural champion, and the Minister certainly supports that. We cannot do everything and, when you look at the issues and the need that come out of social well-being, there is no way that the Department will ever be able to address everything. However, we have a very important role as a rural champion, and that was very well supported by the working group. Another key thing was that we need to very closely examine our rural infrastructure and community assets and make sure that they are actually fit for purpose. Over the years, we have invested greatly in a lot of new developments, but one of the things that came out of the working group was to not forget about the infrastructure that is already there, which has to be fit for purpose. As legislation moves on, simplistic things like disability legislation have made a big difference to what people expect and want. Those expectations are not always being met, and we should be looking at that.

The working group also said that the hearts of our villages and rural areas are key. They should be thriving and, as the Department says, living and active landscapes and places where people want to live. Again, look at COVID and the idea of people not now having to travel to Belfast, Derry or wherever else, and that comes to the fore again. The heart of the village is really important, but the key thing coming out was that infrastructure is very important. Another issue was employment or, as somebody said at one of the meetings, the lack of it, which again, on the back of COVID, is going to

put rural communities under a lot of pressure. One of the main findings of the group was that the lack of basic skill sets among people in rural areas can be a barrier to them finding employment. We need to build the capacity of the workforce, develop their basic skills and give them the skills that will allow them to apply for jobs on a level playing field with others. The other point that was raised on the issue of employment was that we need to encourage people to start developing small businesses. If we can do that, we have an automatic link between that group and the innovation and entrepreneurship working group. If we can develop small businesses to get them on their feet, they can then move to the other group, where they will get support to expand and maybe, going forward, employ more people.

The last thematic pillar and, as I said, probably the number one issue at the conference, is connectivity. When we say, "connectivity", straight away, everybody thinks, "broadband". The working group, however, worked on wider issues. It looked at issues such as rural transport and even the infrastructure between urban and rural areas. Without a doubt, the absolute priority is broadband. Again, that has come to the fore as a result of COVID.

I will give a quick synopsis of the stakeholder event. As I said, there were 124 attendees. That is more than we have ever had at any other event. Several Committee members were there, and that was very much appreciated by the Department. We were very keen to see that representation, because it let people see that the Department and the Committee are placing an importance on that piece of work. All the working groups gave a five-minute presentation, and there was a 20-minute round-table talk. There was an overarching endorsement of everything in the framework. Many people commented that it was good to see the Department there. One person — I kind of looked at them when they said this — said, "It is good to see the Department taking rural development seriously for a change". *[Laughter.]* I took that with a pinch of salt.

**Ms McCandless:** Chair, I am just conscious of the time. Given that we are talking about members' interest in the event, I am conscious that we want to keep a bit of time for questions. If you are content, we will move on to try to make sure that we allow some time for feedback on that briefing, which I hope you found informative.

**Mr Evans:** I can quickly wrap this up, Fiona. I will move on to the pilot schemes. As I said earlier, the reason for developing the pilot schemes was that COVID was putting a lot of pressure on rural businesses. We were also aware that Brexit was around the corner. Another main issue was that we realised that one programme was coming to an end, and, in the past, there has nearly always been a two-year gap, and we did not want to see a gap. We also knew that we could test some of the findings from the working groups.

We have started to launch a number of pilots. We have a rural microbusiness growth scheme, for which there are 27 applications with the Department. Those will be assessed over the next two to three weeks, and we hope to have letters of offer out this side of Christmas, if possible. We have a website development scheme that is particularly targeted at tourism businesses. As a result of COVID, many such businesses discovered that, because they did not have a presence online, they lost out. We are working on that with Tourism Northern Ireland. We are working with local councils on a collaborative experience programme to develop mini-media packages that highlight places to go and things to do and a lot of the small tourism businesses that they can then use to promote the area. We will — this is focused on quite a lot through LEADER — in early January, hopefully, launch a micro food business investment scheme. We were asked to do that many times through LEADER, but we were unable to do so. We will however launch a pilot project in January to look at that. We currently have a rural social economy scheme open. We have had two webinars on that, attended by over 100 social economy enterprises and community interest companies. The scheme closes on 11 December.

We are developing a couple of pilot projects, and one is on microbusinesses and digital investment. The pilot is to make sure people have the equipment and infrastructure to get the most benefit from Project Stratum as we go forward. There is also a microbusiness web development scheme pilot, and that was highlighted because of the success of the tourism project. The pilot projects are rolling out as we go forward.

There are a number of next steps, and I will not go through the slide. You will only be too aware of what we need to do with the framework before we get to the point of publicising it. We hope to have a final draft with the Committee and the Executive early in the new year for approval.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Gareth, for a very helpful and detailed briefing. I will move swiftly to members as we are tight for time.

I want to mention a couple of points. The first is to do with the funding. We have seen that there has been no progress made on the UK shared prosperity fund (SPF). The Committee also has correspondence and a statement from the Minister saying that the British Government is allowing funding to be carried over from the rural development programme but deducting it from the replacement funding that is being provided. I believe that is an act of very bad faith. What is your assessment of the funding that will be available for implementing the programme?

**Ms McCandless:** Chair, if you can hear me, I will start with that question. As part of the Budget exercise, we have submitted bids to support rural businesses and communities. As you know, the Minister has written to the DEFRA Secretary of State expressing his concern about your point that the UK Government is netting-off the funding that is available through pillar 2. The Minister has expressed his concern and disappointment at that, and he has requested full EU replacement funding so that Northern Ireland can benefit from the opportunities of EU exit. It is, maybe, too early to say, as we do not know the outcome. However, the Department has been putting forward a very strong case. The strength of the evidence has been developed through the rural policy framework, and it demonstrates the need to continue to support rural businesses, invest in rural communities and will support any argument for future bids. The Department is strong in continuing to do that, and the Minister continues to make that point.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** OK. I want to mention the connectivity theme. I was one of the 124 attendees, and John was in my workshop at Loughry College. The event was last January and was very helpful and informative. We have also mentioned Gareth's presentation on collaborative experiences. I can see no mention of cooperation measures in that draft rural policy, where projects in the North of Ireland could cooperate with similar projects across Britain or, indeed, in the South of Ireland. Cooperation was an important aspect of the current rural development programme, and it should feature under the connectivity umbrella that is in the draft strategy. Where will cooperation feature? Given Brexit, and the risk that the North will be cut off from Britain and the rest of the EU, where do collaboration and cooperation measures feature in the new programme?

**Ms McCandless:** Chair, I will start, and Paul might want to come in. We do maintain close contact with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, and on 10 November we met colleagues from the Department of Rural and Community Development to look at opportunities. There are a number of LEADER cooperation projects. Maybe Paul or Gareth might want to comment on that.

**Mr Evans:** I will give Paul the chance first, or do you want me to say something? I will say one thing, Declan. On the framework, we applied two or three horizontal principles, as we call them. They are overarching principles that apply right across everything we do in the framework. One is cooperation, another is environmental issues and another is equality, but the idea is that that will come to the fore when we start to develop a programme. We will take the horizontal principles and apply those to the schemes that are coming forward, and that is where you will see the cooperation. As Fiona said, we had an extremely good meeting with our colleagues from the South. We have agreed to set up a little group and start looking into some of those schemes. We are also working really closely with our colleagues in the South on PEACE PLUS, and everything on that scheme is about cross-border cooperation. We have developed what I think is a pretty good bid to go into PEACE PLUS, and it will be fairly significant, I hope, down the line.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Before I move round, I have one last point. Sorry about hogging this, but there are so many questions that I want to ask. What about LEADER? It has been a hugely important element of the rural development programme. Social partners and councillors formed local action groups (LAGs), identified local projects relevant to local areas and implemented them. How will the new programme be rolled out? What will be the future of the LAGs, for example? How will LEADER be incorporated to make sure that the projects are rolled out and that we empower local communities and social partners to identify grassroots projects?

**Ms McCandless:** Chair, I am happy to respond to that. I am conscious that Paul has not had an opportunity to contribute. I am not too sure whether his speakers are working.

We are leaving the EU, so there is no continuation requirements for similar structures to be in place, but we absolutely need to continue to involve our social partners and to make sure that decisions and solutions on our local needs are informed by the people close to the ground. Whilst it is probably too

early to say what approach we will take, we will want to make sure that we have the most effective delivery structures, and we will deliver business cases to make sure that that is taken into account. We want to make sure that community planning partnerships are taken into account, but it is safe to say that, without full knowledge of how it will be progressed, we foresee the involvement of local representatives to advise and to continue to guide on future programme activities. Bringing decision-making very close to the level of those affected by those decisions is, I think, very important.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** That is important because, over the years — some Committee members were probably members of LAGs in the past — really good knowledge and experience bases have been built up through councillors and social partners getting together and doing that joint working, and it will be important that that knowledge and experience is harnessed in any future programme for rural areas.

I will move very swiftly around. Patsy McGlone.

**Mr McGlone:** Am I being heard there OK?

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Yes. Go ahead, Patsy.

**Mr McGlone:** Grand. Thank you. Thanks very much to everybody for coming along today. I will start with Fiona. Fiona, you are the well-known and acknowledged planning professional, so that is where I will start. Fiona will know the area that I am going to talk about. I have been listening, and I am a wee bit conscious that the thinking is that rural equals rural settlements, as in rural villages. I am just putting a marker down. I do not want us to move into the territory of rural equals 'Emmerdale', as in a sort of English mindset that it is just small villages and that is it. As you will know, in the area that I represent — in your area too, Declan, and in many others — the real innovation drivers for economic development have come from people living usually on their own farmland, many of whom have diversified and become extremely successful. That is the sort of area that I represent. Therefore, the microbusiness concept is very important for me, as are the drivers for that and the inspirations for that and how they have evolved. I just wanted to put that marker down.

The second thing leads on from that. I am interested to hear from the Department about rural planning policies and how they impact on microbusinesses, because it is pretty much a regular event that somebody has a notion or a good idea and might even have that good idea advanced to the stage of rural development funding, but the glitch can be the rural policy that has a presumption against the development of a business outwith the development area that is assigned to that, whether it is a village or an industrial development.

Leading on from that are the major things that are the big retardant factors even in those rural settlements. I have to say that this issue has come up twice with me this week already. It is that of infrastructure, specifically sewage disposal works capacity. Your local development plans have been rolled out by your councils, and a lot of work has been put into them, including in Mid Ulster by a former colleague of yours, Chris Boomer, and his staff. The lack of capacity of sewage development works has the ability to render significant parts of those local development plans purely academic. That is the first wee marker. It is a bit of a reality check that has come up twice this week with me already, and that feeds into the sustainability of the rural settlements or those smaller villages. If you do not have people and are not attracting people to live there, there goes your schools and your infrastructure and your small pubs and small shops in those villages.

We are addressing the issue of broadband, and I am glad that it has been flagged up. That feeds in from being an economic issue to being one of rural isolation. That has come to the fore with me more specifically recently with COVID, and I will explain why. Obviously, there is the issue of the ability to get in touch with friends and family and all of that, but you will know that, for many people, a key part of their social hub is their church. Many of the churches were doing broadcasts. In our instance, there was daily Mass. In some instances, they had rosaries, later on at different parts of the week. That is my faith. The ability or otherwise of people to connect with that, particularly some older people, was proving a factor for them. Broadband is very important to connectivity at that level and to tackle rural isolation.

Bear with me, Chair, while I make this important point on dealing with and the tic-tac with the health trusts around connectivity. For many people who are isolated, old or disabled, their basic connectivity is with their domiciliary care worker. The ability to deliver that and the ability of trusts to get staff to do that is a big, big problem in many of our more isolated rural areas. If that has not been flagged up as

an issue with you as being part of rural isolation and connectivity, it should have been. I would like to principally put that marker down that that is a big issue in many rural areas, increasingly so. It all feeds into connectivity, rural isolation, people being cut off and loneliness.

My final point, Chair, if you will bear with me, is that it is good to have a document, it is good to have a think and it is good to have many stakeholders involved in this, but it must be underpinned by funding. We have heard commitments to and promises of post-Brexit funding in the longer term. Have you given any thought to that?

**Ms McCandless:** I will revert back to my planning-policy context to answer the queries from Patsy. There is a close link between rural planning policy and development that will be permitted in rural areas. We want to try to ensure that our rural areas are sustainable, that our businesses have the opportunity to innovate and that we develop the entrepreneurship that Gareth spoke about. Employment is such a key factor. It will drive the growth, and that is what we want. We want sustainable rural growth. We want to do it in a way that is sustainable, makes the best use of the services that are available and that ultimately protects our environment. I think that working with councils and community planning partners will give us a feel for how that can develop.

There are issues with infrastructure capacity, whether it is broadband or sewerage. That piece goes broader than DAERA, and we need to work with our partners, particularly in DFI, to make sure that they are adhering to rural needs and addressing that throughout, so I think that that is a really important point. Allowing us to do these pilots is allowing us to test some of those initiatives. Where there are conflicts in the policy then we need to work with partners to resolve that, or with councils. I think that councils will have a very close understanding of the issues in their local areas, and they will interpret their planning policies according to that.

Maybe Paul will want to comment on your points about domiciliary care and the importance of connectivity, which, I think, has never been more importantly recognised. As a result of COVID, so many people are struggling with that social isolation, connectivity with families and all of the ways that we use our IT. Quite a lot of work has gone on through the TRPSI programme to make sure that those issues that rural dwellers have been facing over the past few months are being tackled. Maybe Paul will want to say something on that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** I think, Fiona, that Paul may be —

**Ms McCandless:** Sorry, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** — looking to get in there. Hopefully Project Stratum will get it all sorted out.

**Ms McCandless:** All I will say, Chair, is that a lot of work has gone on to make sure there is access to services. The Department has managed that in as many ways as possible, from the Forest Service helping to distribute food to working with partners in Public Health Agency (PHA) etc, to make that we have the necessary arrangements and support, as best as possible, in place.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you for that, Fiona. Patsy, I am going to ask Rosemary to come in.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you. Thank you for your presentation. Like Patsy, I am going back into the planning policy, as I want to ask you a bit about that. If somebody has, perhaps, been left a rural farm with no buildings on it whatsoever, there seems to be a huge gap, in the sense that they cannot build a shed until they can prove that they have been an active farmer for six years. What work have you done with the planning policy branch with regard to trying to get that, and those types of issues, resolved?

**Ms McCandless:** I was formerly involved with planning, but it has been a number of years since I worked with the Department for Infrastructure. However, I understand the issues that you are referring to, and I understand the issues and restrictions that apply to development in rural areas, along with the reasoning for that. As I said earlier, while local councils now have those planning powers, they can attach judgement to the particular circumstances of each case, and we would want to make sure that our local planning authorities adhere to —. It is the principle of planning powers with local councils that they have the powers to understand, and that that decision-making is very close to their local level. If

there is a feeling that there is a planning policy that needs to be reviewed in order to support what we trying to achieve in rural development, then that is a conversation that we, as the developers of the policy, need to have with the Department for Infrastructure, and also with the local councils, which have been very involved in taking forward this policy framework. I am not sure if Gareth is aware that this issue was brought up by the local council representatives, but he might want to comment on that.

**Mr Evans:** There has always been an issue around planning, particularly with the funding through LEADER, and, as you highlighted, particularly when it is microbusinesses that want to develop on-farm. There has always been a bit of a clash there.

In the previous programme, we set up a small group of us and the planners. We met about once a month to look at individual issues and projects. I found that to be a great help. At one stage, we had some £3 million committed to projects that were stuck in planning. I am not being critical, but planners on the ground sometimes did not realise the impact that it was having further behind. That £3 million was tied up and committed, and we could do nothing else with it.

I have been looking, over the past couple of days, believe it or not, at setting up something similar, and I was going to have a conversation with Fiona about it, given her knowledge of the planners. Going into a new programme, that would be worthwhile.

**Mrs Barton:** Yes, that would be worth doing. We want to see rural areas come alive again. If a person cannot get planning permission for a shed to prove that they are an active farmer, it is a great hindrance.

Have you fed much into Project Stratum to support it at looking at where broadband will go in the countryside? We heard in the Chamber the other day that certain areas in Fermanagh and South Tyrone were recommended for broadband. I understand that 300 to 400 homes have been pulled out of the project. Those are the most isolated, and we need to be getting broadband there.

**Mr Evans:** I sit on the project board. The Department is a partner with the Department for the Economy to the level of £15 million. I sat on the project board long before we ever decided to put money in. The Minister looked at how much money was going in, what an additional £15 million could do and how much further into rural areas that could penetrate. That is why that funding is going in.

How that is rolled out comes down to a technical design with the company. As a project board, we do not have a lot of input to who gets it first and who gets it second. For the company — as a member of the project board, I agree with it — the idea is to use the best methodology to make the best use of the available money. The more people you can connect, the better. Whatever methodology is used to do that, the endgame has to be to close the gap completely. The project will leave very little unconnected. As you see it roll out, you will possibly see the number of premises being targeted going up, as opposed to going down.

**Mrs Barton:** You believe that the most-isolated premises that cannot get broadband will get it after this project has been rolled out.

**Mr Evans:** There will be very few premises left. We are talking, certainly, four figures or less.

**Mrs Barton:** You have always given money through the rural development programme to new and innovative projects, and rightly so. In the west, however, a number of projects have been on the go for maybe 20 years and are old and tired. They need money to be put in to revitalise them. There does not seem to be as much money for revitalising some of the projects that are already there. New projects are fine, but some of the old ones need a wee bit of a lift to get them going again. Has consideration been given to that?

**Mr Evans:** Fiona, I can probably take that one. Can Paul get in yet? No. I take it, Rosemary, that you mean the likes of community projects.

**Mrs Barton:** Yes.

**Mr Evans:** In my presentation — I am sorry that I steamrolled my way through it, but there was a lot to get through — I tried to allude to one of the things that came out very strongly from the working groups, which was that, over the years, we have heavily invested in new premises and new

community infrastructure but a lot of the older community infrastructure has been left behind. That will be one of the key focuses of the programme going forward, and we may well look, in the interim, at doing some sort of a pilot to test some of the assumptions coming out of that. If we do that, it will be sooner rather than later.

**Mrs Barton:** Thank you.

**Mr Blair:** Thanks, Paul, Gareth and Fiona, for the information this morning, and thank you again for the Loughry experience that we had at the time that you referred to. This is my time for a plug to say that it would be very good to repeat that experience and, of course, there is a lovely facility called Greenmount in my constituency that you might want to come to next time.

Some of the questions that I had around planning have been covered already, but I will try to ask about it more strategically. Whilst I welcome the focus on issues around connectivity, innovation and entrepreneurship, I am very keen to know whether the interdepartmental approach, which has been applied through working groups and the project board, will be carried through and whether there is a commitment from other Departments to continue to work with that.

I ask that because we know that there are issues around planning. I have raised previously things like agritourism, which is not quite the thing in this region that it is in other places. If someone opens a small or microbrewery in a rural area, they cannot sell their own product, but the pub down the road can sell it, except that it might be closed for lengthy periods at holiday times, which are vital to tourism, and there is an interdepartmental link there also. There is most certainly an issue around planning for farms choosing to do different things on their premises.

In short, is that interdepartmental commitment for the medium and long term and is it on top of the work being done at project board level and in other working groups at this point?

**Ms McCandless:** There is a need for us to work across Departments for those types of issues, absolutely. In terms of the tourism projects that you talked about, at a strategic level, I have participated in the Minister Dodds-led tourism recovery group, and Paul participates as a member of the Tourism Northern Ireland-led (TNI) working group.

I have also brought together a group of our interests within DAERA to look at tourism, because we have issues such as forestry, country parks, equine, angling and all of that, to make sure that we bring that integration together. It is also really important that we do that with other Departments, particularly if there is a policy, be that planning or whatever the policy or approach might be, that is impacting on what we are trying to achieve.

As Gareth said, it seems that the planning partners working group will provide an opportunity for us to address some of the issues that are being referred to. It is really important that we are able to work together collaboratively to achieve the outcomes that we want to achieve from this new policy.

**Mr Blair:** Thank you for that.

**Mr Harvey:** Thank you, Fiona, Gareth and Paul. I could start by saying to Gareth that it is never a good idea to rush a man from Donegal, but we will try anyway. *[Laughter.]* I have a few things to ask about the diversification of rural businesses, the pilot schemes — I am narrowing this down as much as I can — and agri-food projects.

I have noticed lately that a few farms are doing local sales of fresh milk and that seems to be a new project. Have you had any conversations about that? It seems like a really good idea and one that could develop to sell other produce as well.

**Ms McCandless:** Gareth, do you want to answer that and mention the future issues that we might explore?

**Mr Evans:** Yes. The food scheme that we are looking at is, primarily, targeted at micro food businesses that want to shift up to the next level. For example, that may be where a small bakery is producing scones for the two local garages and, all of a sudden, Spar comes along and says, "We hear that you have great scones. We would like to sell them in all our Spars". That is the kind of business that we want to target. A key part of that scheme is that at least 50% of the ingredients for

any product must come from Northern Ireland. That is key because we want to support our farmers and anyone else who can produce an input to the food.

On the diversification side, we have always looked at diversification as a rural business. Many years ago, we decided to stop calling businesses "rural businesses" and "diversified businesses" and to just call them "rural businesses". In the pilot scheme that we have launched, a number of so-called diversified businesses are included in the 27. When it comes to funding business at the minute, we are trying to go beyond what economists would call "mature markets". We are trying to avoid providing funding for businesses that are fairly common, because you get into issues about displacement. We are looking for the new and innovative businesses that have not really been taken forward before. The fresh milk is an interesting one. On another scheme that was run under the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme, a couple of people have applied for grant aid for the vending machines. Only time will tell how well those projects will roll out. It is very much a case of having the right location. I will not be surprised if we see a number of farm shops installing milk vending machines. That will suit very well.

**Mr Harvey:** That is very good. Thank you very much. If they have applied under TRPSI or are showing an interest, that is very good.

I will just finish by saying that, hopefully, Project Stratum will help with broadband for all. It is certainly looking to do so.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Thank you, Harry and Gareth. Maurice, can you hear me?

**Mr M Bradley:** Yes, Chair. I am moving around this office like a butterfly in a flower garden to try to get a signal. I am in the middle of Coleraine and have no broadband, so I do not know what that means for the rest of the country.

Chair, I would like to pick up on a couple of things. On the social enterprise strategy and ensuring that *[Inaudible]* are financially sustainable, the grants are good to enhance or fund start-ups, but, often, in my experience, once the grant finance ends, sustainability is hard to maintain.

Another point that I want to pick up on is something that Gareth said and Fiona alluded to, in response to Patsy and Rosemary, around the diversification of rural business to ensure innovation and to encourage start-ups. There is a great difficulty within the planning process. The problem with planning, across all 10 council areas, is the interpretation of planning policy. There seems to be no clear policy on rural interpretations. Will the Department engage with the Department for Infrastructure to relax planning policies and allow rural businesses to grow?

**Ms McCandless:** I will go back to the planning response. The working group that Gareth mentioned and working with planning partners would be really helpful to understand some of the issues and whether an interpretation of policy can be looked at to see how it matches with what we are trying to achieve. The planning powers are being interpreted by planning officers in councils. They should be aware of the issues that face their local area and be able to apply the policy accordingly.

On the point about social enterprise and providing grants, as Gareth alluded, we need to build resilience, capacity and capability into our rural communities, and that is part of what we are trying to achieve. It should not be about the provision of a one-off grant; the process should recognise the need for capacity and capability building, and training can be used as part of the process. The Department is trying to take that into account as well.

**Mr Evans:** Maurice, we recognise exactly what you said about business start-ups. The Department is looking at putting in place a programme that will be very similar to the farm business development groups, except that it will be microbusiness development groups That will bring people together as a network, teach them some basic business skills such as doing accounts and getting supply chains in place, albeit a small, local supply chain, and mentor them through the process of becoming a business person. We hope to work that scheme into the new overarching programme.

**Mr M Bradley:** Thank you, Gareth. I am keen to see farm businesses expand, as the farmer will get more pounds for his produce if he sells it directly and bypasses the shops. Thank you, Gareth and Fiona.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Clare, are you there?

**Ms Bailey:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks for the presentation. How long are the pilot schemes planned to run for?

**Ms McCandless:** Gareth, can you give an update on each of the four pilot schemes? One scheme is currently open.

**Mr Evans:** The four schemes have been launched. All the applications are in for the microbusiness growth scheme. Hopefully, those will be assessed before Christmas and letters of offer sent out. The web business development scheme is targeted at tourism. Those applications are with Tourism NI and are being assessed. Tourism NI plans to have all the letters of offer sent out before the end of March. The rural social enterprise investment scheme closes on 11 December, and the Department's target is to have those applications processed and letters of offer sent out by the start of February. The applications are in for the experiential tourism scheme. Those applications are from councils, and there are not as many as expected. We hope to have those processed and out the door by January.

To go back to what I said earlier about the key factors: one was to bridge the gap in funding; one was to get money out on the back of COVID; and one was to test assumptions. We have already learnt from the growth scheme. We tested a few different ways of processing that we have not done before. We have always been criticised for the amount of red tape that we bind ourselves in. We had a significant reduction in the red tape for the growth scheme, and it seems to be working. People are finding it easier to get through the process. We are feeling the results of some of those schemes even though the letters of offer are not out. On the growth scheme, I can think of four distinct findings that we have had already that can be applied to future programmes.

**Ms Bailey:** A number of schemes are up and running, and you expect that most, if not all, will get their letter of offer and be long-term, sustainable projects. The planning and development of the framework started two years ago, did it not?

**Mr Evans:** It started in November 2018.

**Ms Bailey:** OK. I know from an answer from the Minister that the consultation was due to go out in the autumn of this year. We have started the pilot projects, so, obviously, it is well developed. When is the consultation going to happen? When is the buy-in, when is the sign-off and when are we going to see the finished document?

**Ms McCandless:** Thank you, Clare, for that question. We have undertaken an awful lot of consultation throughout the exercise; we have engaged extensively with stakeholders, as Gareth pointed out, throughout it. We do not think, "We've done all of this framework, and now we're going out to consult"; we have tried to do it as a continuum throughout the whole process. As such, we are fairly hopeful that, by the time that we go out to consultation, there will be quite a bit of buy-in to that. We had hoped to go out in the autumn; the Minister said that previously, and he is keen for us to get it out to formal public consultation. However, the impact of COVID has delayed that to some extent. We prioritised our resources to try to get funding out on the ground to our local communities and rural businesses to help to sustain them throughout this prolonged period. We have had the opportunity to identify the findings from the pilots, and we are going to build those in to our final framework. We have drafted our final framework document. We are trying to tinker it so that it is influenced by some of the findings from the pilots, and we hope to have it launched early next year. As a result of COVID, we will probably do a consultation online rather than having it in Loughry or Greenmount; we use both of those facilities a lot. It will probably be early in the new year via Citizen Space for an eight-week consultation period.

**Ms Bailey:** Grand. How many pilot schemes have been approved and are up and running at the minute?

**Mr Evans:** Four.

**Ms Bailey:** Thank you.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you for your presentation. It is important that we encourage people to stay in their local area. The difficulty is that young people have perhaps no broadband and a number of different issues and they move away from the countryside. It is important that there is help for farmers, and small farmers especially, to diversify and that there is capacity to encourage them and to help them to apply for funding.

The issue of planning has been covered. Many of us thought that planning going to councils would have made things easier. The opposite has been the case. There is red tape around some rural development, but there is a lot more around planning at the minute. I am dealing with planners every day; there are a lot of issues in that regard. It is important that there is a joined-up approach and work across Departments. The Agriculture Department needs to work with councils on a policy that is deliverable and easily accessible for the farming community, especially small farms.

Is there a need for more community support to help to deliver the objectives in the countryside?  
Gareth, you said that a micro-food investment scheme will be delivered. Will you give us a bit more information about that?

**Mr Evans:** I will answer the micro-food question first. We hoped to launch that scheme in January, but we now hope to do a soft launch in December. The Minister will do a soft launch of the scheme, and, hopefully, information will be available to potential applicants throughout December, so that people have the opportunity to read about what is on offer and to determine whether it suits them. That means that, when the scheme opens in January, they are not starting from scratch; they will have a reasonable idea about what they might want to apply for.

**Ms McCandless:** We are happy to take away your point about working cross-departmentally with DFI planners and planners in local government. Gareth referred to the suggestion that we should build up that working group again and make sure that there is a clear understanding that the objectives and outcomes that we are trying to achieve are supported and understood by people in local government and the Department for Infrastructure.

**Mr Irwin:** I think that the councils will be looking at their planning policies in the coming months. It is very important that you feed into that too.

**The Chairperson (Mr McAleer):** Clare asked a question that we wanted clarity on, which was about when it opens for public consultation. You have told us that it will be open for public consultation early in the new year, which is good. It is important that local community groups, the sector and the wider public have their say in making sure that we get this right.

There is a big issue with planning, and DFI is a huge stakeholder that DAERA needs to work with. DAERA also needs to work with each council's local development plan, and those development plans need to support the rural policy to move business development forward.

As a former councillor and current MLA, I quite often find contradictory situations whereby DAERA supports funding applications for microbusinesses or farm diversification grants, but another branch of government that is involved in planning makes a presumption against economic development in the countryside. That needs to be put right so that it does not impede the implementation of the rural policy that we all want to be rolled out for the benefit of people.

Gareth, Paul and Fiona, thank you very much for appearing before the Committee. We will move on, as we have some witnesses who represent the rural sector. Thank you for your very comprehensive briefing and answers to our questions.

**Ms McCandless:** Thank you, Chair and members.