



Ronnie Jordan
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Room 407, Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast BT4 3SB

9th August 2006

Dear Mr Jordan

RE: Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2007 -13

Please see attached Dungannon and South Tyrone Council's response to Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2007 -13.

The Council is keen to work in partnership with DARD to develop a suitable delivery model for the Plan commencing 2006 to 2013 (2015). It would be important that discussions begin as soon possible to allow delivery of the Plan to commence in 2007.

If you have any queries or require further information on any of the comments provided, please contact Claire Linney, Corporate Strategy and Policy Officer on 028 8772 0319.

Yours sincerely

John Campbell
Chief Executive

Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council Response to Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2007 -13

General Comments

Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council would propose that Councils work in close partnership DARD to develop a suitable delivery model for the Plan commencing 2006 to 2013 (2015). It would be important that discussions begin as soon as possible to allow for the Plan to commence delivery in 2006.

Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council would strongly request that funding for delivery of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2007 – 2013 is allocated across rural Northern Ireland taking account of need and rural deprivation and not just allocated per head of population.

Given the importance of this rural development plan 2007 – 2013 to support the delivery of the Regional Development Strategy 2025, to ensure balanced development across Northern Ireland, it is therefore critical that the full amount of funding is sought. Given that a large percentage of the funding for rural development is EU funded (exact split unknown) which alleviates pressure on mainstream government spend, it is therefore essential that the full cost is met at the outset to ensure complete delivery of the plan. It is also important to note that whilst the plan does reflect 775mn, this is for a period of 9 years.

There is real concern as to the level of funding in Axis 3 which is 78mn over 9 years, which is on average 10mn pa. for economic and social development across rural Northern Ireland. If funding is not forthcoming to deliver on the Plan it would not be practical to reduce Axis 3 any further. As stated in the consultation there is an opportunity to increase the funding for the delivery of the Plan through voluntary modulation. This should be used to its maximum to support the full implementation of the Plan but to also further develop Axis 3 in terms of its role in the development of rural areas and people over and above land management and agriculture, recognising that the rural area is more diverse than just agricultural.

There is a need to ensure flexibility within the delivery of the Plan. Whilst the majority of funding should be focused through local delivery, there needs to be some provision for sub regional project development for example to undertake workspace on behalf of a number of villages to ensure critical mass and avoid duplication or for strategic marketing activities.

It is important that the delivery of this plan avoids unnecessary bureaucracy whilst retaining accountability. This can be achieved by consolidating delivery at the local level through local authorities (RPA structure), who would have the responsibility for developing and overseeing the Leader model for local delivery linked to community planning.

The establishment of a Monitoring Committee and Rural Network inclusive of key stakeholders are welcomed. It is important that these are established on the principle of real partnership, and link to existing structures that are in place at the regional level and at EU level such as the EU Rural Forum for cross inter and trans-national links on rural development.

The definition of rural as defined 'an area with a population under 4500' has implications for large villages and/or small towns which are over this number but which are not classified within DSD urban regeneration definition. It is important that Departments' cross reference on definitions to ensure all of Northern Ireland is covered for development.

Delivery

Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council would support the key principles of the new Plan of Effectiveness, Equality Focused, Capable, Accountable, Flexible and Local.

To ensure the key principles are met particularly in relation to transparency and accountability and to meet local need local authorities are best placed to deliver on the new Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan (NIRDP) 2007 - 2013. Local authorities provide for the most accountable and transparent process of delivery and have strong established partnerships.

Councils have been given the rural development as a core function as part of the RPA and would therefore be best placed to commence this role under the delivery of the NIRDP 2007 – 2013. The Council would propose that Axis 3 and parts of Axis 1 would commence within local authorities with immediate effect. Council should also be given the remit to develop and oversee a LEADER model linked to community planning.

It is important that the necessary technical support and resources is provided to Councils to manage the delivery of the Plan.

It is envisaged that Axis 2 relating to agricultural competitiveness and environmental management and forestry would remain with the Department until 2008 when negotiations would take place as to transfer of such roles to Council with complementary staff. The Council would like to commence discussions with the Department to address the transfer of additional activities under the plan and asset base.

Evaluations of Council LED and other programmes have shown value for money, high local level impact, integration, strong partnership, and cost efficiency in delivery. Local authorities are best placed to keep the cost of delivery to a minimum through effective and efficient systems and procedures.

At present all of Axis 3 and parts of Axis 1 type activity falls within the remit of Local Economic Development and rural development, Tourism Development, Community development and good relations. To avoid potential duplication and funding confusion which occurred in previous EU programmes a coordinated approach from one body with accountability and transparency is required, this being local authorities.

Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council believes Councils are best placed to lead the development of a LEADER model structure. This would ensure links to community planning and integration with new delivery areas such as local planning and roads etc. Council has existing partnerships across the community; business, and heritage sectors to allow the LEADER model to deliver across all themes of Axis 3 and parts of Axis 1. The Council also has inter-territorial cooperation and trans-national cooperation links such as Ireland, Germany, Poland etc.

The governance relationship proposed for the delivery of the Plan should be similar to that of the LED programme wherein the Council links directly with the main government department.

The Council recognises the importance of the RPA and restructuring in terms of commencing delivery of a plan in 2006 that will run to 2013. Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council propose to commence discussions with other Councils in line with the proposed RPA, and in partnership with DARD to address the potential delivery of the Plan (Axis 3 and parts of Axis 1). Discussions will also need to take place with existing partnership structures

Axis 1 Improving competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector

In terms of the proposed Agricultural Marketing Development Grant Scheme, Council would stress that such initiatives should also allow for flexibility regarding capital spend, based on needs of the sector for example, to establish and operate such initiatives as local farmers markets.

The Agricultural Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme should be encouraging the development of new food products given the changing climate and new diverse population and widening of consumer choice.

It states in both initiatives under this axis that the level of support would be 20% of cost. This percentage contribution to cost is low to encourage uptake and make a real impact. It does state that there will be an additional 20% from the local public sector grant, Council would seek clarification as to what this means, and where the money would be coming from.

Axis 2 Improving the environment and countryside through land management

Over 50% of the overall budget (55%, 459mn) is targeted at the Agri-Environment Programme, 261million of which is carry-over projects from the last programme. Whilst it is recognised that this programme is additional activity over and above standard regulation and the modularisation grant (protection of groundwater, soil, the environment, organic farming etc); it remains important to address commitment from government to this as mainstream provision.

It is important to link forestry development and use by people for both existing and new areas of development, and to link eco tourism, an innovative form of tourism that is being maximised elsewhere in Europe. Too often forestry is not accessible to people to use. It is also critical to link Planning to development of the countryside to ensure integration of development and not to destroy areas of natural habitat.

Axis 3 Improving the quality of life through diversification of economic activity

In a number of objectives under this Axis the target audience is restricted to people in villages, however it is critical that rural settlements including hamlets, clachans, hinterlands etc. are also included. For example under the objective 'Basic services for the economy and rural population', this initiative will also be relevant to rural people outside villages who may be maximising local resources such as a community building to deliver services to a rural community. The target group named across all of Axis 3 should include both village people and rural communities including townlands and hinterlands. It may also be feasible to split funding under this measure to ensure access to all who live in rural areas.

Council would support the importance as stated within the Objective of Village Renewal of a community development approach. Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council currently works in partnership with COSTA, CWSAN, STEP and Animate (the latter focused on migrant workers) to support a community development approach to local delivery.

Whilst 'A Shared Future' is referenced on page 14 to objective 'There is therefore a need to promote village renewal and development to enhance the sense of shared ownership and community', this needs to go across all objectives of Axis 3, with output targets to correlate to it.

The development of natural tourism stated in the Plan is important, however it is also crucial to recognise the changing nature of the tourist who now requires a wide range of activity to suit; from cultural experience, accommodation to eating, shopping etc (source: Centre of Tourism and Cultural Change UK). The link to forestry as a tourism asset is also important as highlighted previously in Axis 2.

The document does correctly state that broadband coverage is now implemented across NI, it remains important to note that in many rural areas it is still cost restrictive, which needs to be addressed to further promote economic development and other flexible initiatives such as homeworking.