

Report on	Davagh Forest/Dark Skies Observatory
Reporting Officer	Michael Browne
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Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	×

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To update the Council and seek approval to apply for additional funding from the DEARA Rural Tourism programme (Round 2) for an outdoor interpretation visitor experience for Davagh Forest/Dark Skies Observatory and visitor centre.
2.0	Background
2.1	In the autumn of 2015 officers were advised that DAERA would be opening a Rural Tourism Development fund seeking applications from local authorities for tourism projects. These have to be unique and robust tourism projects in terms of attracting visitors and display economic growth. During this round of funding Councils could potentially apply for up to £500k, which had to match funded at a rate of at least 25%. Mid Ulster Council at the time identified this funding and aligned it to a unique and innovative project in Davagh Forest based around the unique Dark Skies and the rich Heritage offering the area presents.
2.2	On 25 th July 2017 notification was received from DAERA announcing that the Rural Tourism scheme was finally approved, indicating that there would be an open call for full applications will be made on 14 th August, with a closing date of 27 th October 2017 which was extended to the end of February 2018.
2.3	The Mid Ulster Davagh Forest Dark Skies project team have now submitted the round one application along with Economic Appraisal and Business Plan to DEARA Rural Tourism funding programme for £500k and are awaiting a decision early in the new year.
2.4	During this time the Council also applied to the Landfill Tax Fund for additional funds for the interpretation offering inside the building to ensure that the visitor would enjoy a fully immersive and engaging experience.
3.0	Main Report

3.1	In addition to the first round DAERA Rural Tourism and the Landfill Tax funding a second round of the Rural Tourism programme has now been announced by DAERA and Councils have been invited to submit an expression of interest by the end of January 2018.
3.2	In a previous report presented to the Councils Development Committee in October 17, the need to apply for extra funding from the Landfill Tax funding to enhance the visitor experience inside the observatory/visitor centre was identified. The increased visitor experience will present the visitor to the Centre/ Observatory with a unique, immersive visitor experience based around the richness of both the astronomy and the archaeological heritage of the area.
3.3	In October a meeting was held with officers from DAERA and Mid Ulster District Council officers to discuss the current status of this project and to receive updates from DAERA regarding the funding programme. At this meeting the DAERA officers indicated that an additional funding opportunity for this project could also be applied for under the Round 2 DAERA Rural Tourism funding stream. The project team were also advised by DAERA that between £250,000 and up to £500,000 with 25% match funding could be applied for. We have also been advised that we could use £20k-£30k for technical assistance to scope out the project. This presents the Council with a further opportunity to increase the overall attractiveness of the project and subsequently increase potential visitor numbers.
3.4	Currently there is a procurement exercise being carried out to acquire and appoint a company to design and build the indoor element of the visitor experience. We would now recommend submitting an expression of interest for the round two, and if successful we proceed to carry out a scoping study for an outdoor visitor experience.
3.5	With the potential of additional funding the project team are now considering extending the interpretation to the outside of the building, which will present a greater experience to the visitor, taking in and utilising the local environment.
3.6	Officers now feel that by increasing the interpretation both inside and outside, the visitor centre will be an engaging, unique attraction and will broaden both its local and out of state visitor attractiveness.
3.7	This project will be an initial building block that will contribute to “The Heart of Ancient Ulster” developments and seek International Dark Sky accreditation for the area.

4.0	Other Considerations			
4.1	<u>Financial & Human Resources Implications</u> Breakdown of amended budget and funders: -			
	Funders	Amount £000k	Specific	Status
	Mid Ulster District Council	£250,000	Planning, fees, construction.	
	DAERA Rural Tourism Fund, round 1.	£500,000	Construction	Submitted
	Landfill Tax Funding	£250,000	Interpretation and visitor experience, indoor.	Submitted & successful.
	DAERA Rural Tourism Fund, round 2.	£250,000	Interpretation and visitor experience, indoor.	Seeking permission to apply for the scoping study.
4.2	<u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u> N/A			
4.3	<u>Risk Management Implications</u> N/A			
5.0	Recommendation(s)			
5.1	Permission to seek additional funding from the DAERA's Rural Tourism funding programme of up to £250k, with match funding of £62,500 (25%) to Design & Build Outdoor Interpretative that will add to the overall attractiveness and enhance the Davagh Forest Dark Skies Visitor Centre project. Total cost of the project £312,500			
5.2	Permission to engage original ICT team Teague & Sally to contract manage the Interpretative elements and associated works of the build which was not included in their original fee submission. Fees will be basis as per their original tender submission.			

6.0	Documents Attached & References