

APPENDIX 1 – LETTER TO MINISTER POOTS, DAERA



Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

15 June 2020

Mr Edwin Poots MLA
Minister of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Private Office
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Ballymiscraw
Belfast
BT4 3SB

Dear Minister Poots

Mid Ulster District Council – proposal for COVID-19 Rural Business Support Programme

I write to you at a time of crisis within the rural economy, both here in Mid Ulster and across the province. The impact of COVID-19 has been immediate and particularly devastating for our rural businesses here in Mid Ulster. We are the area most impacted by COVID in Northern Ireland and within the top 10 regions worse impacted in the whole of the UK. The stark reality is that many businesses who were forced to close during lockdown simply won't open again. We are talking here about family businesses build up over generations that have held the fabric of our rural areas together, providing jobs and wages to support families and hold communities together.

As a rural Council we have always strived to support our businesses to grow and flourish – your Department has not to be found wanting in helping us do so. Now it is time to help these same businesses survive this crisis. Let me stress this cannot be done by this Council acting alone. For this reason are asking for support from DAERA to deliver an immediate intervention focused on business recovery within the rural economy of Mid Ulster.

Since the beginning of lockdown measures we have been talking and listening intently to our businesses to keep abreast of their emerging concerns and needs. Initially these focused on accessing emergency funds and furloughing staff. Our businesses are now preparing for re-opening - but within a very different business environment to before. We have developed a COVID-19 Business Recovery Plan informed by our business owners which clearly identifies the need to support business navigate into a “new normal”.

Cookstown Office
Burn Road
Cookstown
BT80 8DT

Dungannon Office
Circular Road
Dungannon
BT71 6DT

Magherafelt Office
Ballyronan Road
Magherafelt
BT45 6EN

Telephone 03000 132 132
info@midulstercouncil.org
www.midulstercouncil.org

You will be aware we are currently working with DfC on a support package for businesses within our main towns and we want to replicate this for rural businesses outside of these areas with funding support from DAERA. The number of businesses in Mid Ulster located outside of our main towns is stark. In total we have more than 9,000 VAT registered businesses – over 7,000 are in areas classified as rural. This highlights the scale of the task at hand and all the more reason why immediate action is needed.

We are proposing a COVID-19 capital funding programme specifically targeting all rural based business across the District. The focus of this initiative is on business recovery where funding support of up to £5,000 per business will be made available to business owners for internal and/or external alterations needed to make their premises COVID-19 compliant as per Government Regulations. It would also support businesses with equipment/machinery needed to introduce new business practices that have come to light as a result of lockdown restrictions. Indicatively these works would include:

- Modifying the internal layout of business premises to ensure compliance with Covid19 social distancing protocols (eg, flexi-panels in work areas, building / remodelling works, etc).
- Internal/external Covid-19 signage to promote awareness of social distancing measures in place.
- ICT equipment to facilitate staff working remotely.
- Purchase of Covid-19 items of equipment to allow the business to operate safely and provide reassurance to customers, eg, PPE (hand sanitisers, masks, gloves, visors, high-visibility vests for staff, etc), free-standing hand sanitiser stations, elbow operated taps etc.
- External modifications such as awnings etc, to protect customers who may have to queue to enter business premises.
- Internal/external collection/ delivery points to avoid customers or suppliers having to fully enter the business premises.
- Professional expertise for the business eg, health & safety audits/assessments, drawings/plans required to modify the business to ensure Covid-19 compliance etc.

This list is not exhaustive but captures the requirements across all of our business sectors at this time. We are seeking funding of £1.5m for this programme to support Mid Ulster's rural businesses.

There are three fundamental requirements that need to be reflected within this programme.

- Firstly it needs to offer 100% funding with no match fund requirement from applicants. Cash flows are already depleted within businesses so to have full effect this programme should offer full cost recovery.
- Secondly, the application process needs to be simple and non-bureaucratic. This does not imply that probity and good governance be set aside but a balance must be struck in order for quick delivery.
- Thirdly and most importantly is timing. Making this support available as soon as possible will make the difference between businesses deciding to close permanently or begin to rebuild.

These are extraordinary times which need an innovative and immediate response. We call on DAERA to help us pull together the support programme outlined above which will make a significant positive impact on the long-term recovery of the rural economy here in Mid Ulster.

I look forward to your prompt response.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Cathal Mallaghan
Chair

CC: Mr Paul Donnelly – Director for Rural Affairs, DAERA.

APPENDIX 2



Netherleigh
Massey Avenue
Belfast BT4 2JP
Tel: 028 9052 9577
email: geraldine.fee@economy-ni.gov.uk

Councillor Sean Clarke
Chairperson
Mid-Ulster District Council Broadband Working Group
Circular Road
DUNGANNON
BT71 6DT

22 June 2020

Dear Sean

MEETING WITH MID-ULSTER DISTRICT COUNCIL IN RELATION TO PROJECT STRATUM

Thank you for your letter of 8 June 2020 seeking a meeting to update the Broadband Working Group on the progress of Project Stratum.

You will be aware that the evaluation for Project Stratum is well underway and due to conclude in the next few weeks. The procurement will then enter its final phase of corporate governance, and the project team continues to work to an ambitious timeline that anticipates contract award in late September 2020.

In these circumstances, it would not be appropriate for the Department to discuss the project at this sensitive time, and not until such time that we are in a position to fully discuss the outcome of this highly competitive procurement process. I regret, therefore, that I am unable to meet with the Broadband Working Group, at this juncture.

Telecoms officials have engaged with all councils at key milestones in the project. We fully intend to do so again at the point of contract award. I would be very happy to meet with the Broadband Working Group at that time.

Finally, can I ask you to note that, when corresponding with government departments at this time, it is recommended that email be utilised, as government offices are largely closed. This will ensure that your correspondence arrives with the intended recipient as speedily as possible.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Geraldine Fee'.

GERALDINE FEE

Director
Tourism, Telecoms, Minerals & Petroleum Division