



## **COVID RECOVERY SMALL SETTLEMENTS REGENERATION PROGRAMME - DRAFT DISCUSSION PAPER**

### **Background**

1. The issue of support for the physical regeneration of smaller, rural settlements i.e. those with population of under 5,000 people, arises on a regular basis. Historically, the Department for Communities' (DfC) and its predecessors' physical regeneration activities have been targeted within urban areas (settlements with a population of 5,000 and over). In 2016, the then Minister for Communities, Paul Givan, announced plans to extend this support to settlements with a population below 5,000. However, the Executive was then suspended meaning the additional budget was not secured. The proposal, consequently, did not proceed.
2. Earlier this year Minister Hargey wrote to Ministerial colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to secure their agreement to start the process of discussion around the focus, scope and format of a COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme. Developing and implementing a programme based on regenerating small settlements would complement the recently delivered COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme and provide a mechanism for investing in these areas to aid recovery from the pandemic. This paper sets out the key aspects of the proposed Programme.
3. It is intended that the proposed COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme would build upon the successful collaborative approach of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. This saw the three Departments contribute to the establishment of objectives, jointly fund and oversee the delivery the programme. Councils worked with stakeholders to identify priority projects for delivery on the ground.



## **Policy basis**

4. DfC's Urban Regeneration and Community Development policy framework has as a core objective, the vision of creating urban centres which are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to live, work and relax. Aligned to achieving this objective, the Department has supported the delivery of a number of programmes across our towns and cities. These include revitalisation, public realm, urban development grants, and comprehensive development schemes.
5. The proposed COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme would aim to implement similar types of interventions in smaller settlements. Projects would aim to address identified need, and provide infrastructure that would service rural communities.
6. Similarly, DAERA has provided support for smaller settlements through initiatives including the Village Renewal Programme. This initiative provides infrastructural improvements such as enhanced public realm, better footpaths, street furniture and lighting, and public seating. Plans are developed by local stakeholder groups, in conjunction with DAERA and local Councils.
7. DfI is focussed on supporting projects that progress its policy objectives relating to active travel, promoting connectivity and access to services, and/or creating and enhancing green / blue spaces. Potential projects could include:
  - cycle tracks or lanes - including pop-up cycle lanes and creating space on pathways for cyclists;
  - pavement or footway widening to allow for physical distancing;
  - cycle parking and charging facilities;
  - connection pathways to access town centres the centre of settlements and key services – adapting existing routes and/or creating desirable new ingress and egress routes;
  - tree planting incidental to creating/improving walking or cycling paths; and
  - parklets, rain gardens, living roofs and living vertical gardens.



## **Programme principles**

8. The overarching principles of the COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme are set out below:

- projects should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders;
- projects should be based on agreed local investment plans;
- projects should address specific local concerns and deliver specific, measureable benefits;
- programme parameters should be flexible enough to allow for the development of local solutions;
- the Programme can support new and innovative actions; and
- projects supported should include 'quick wins', delivering visible results within reasonable timescales.

## **Programme format**

9. Responsibility for identifying project proposals within the rural settlement context would sit with each Council, and would reflect the priorities and opportunities identified at a local level. Key considerations in the development of projects for support would include the establishment of need that should be served, and the value for money case for the proposed actions. In developing any proposals for funding, Councils would be responsible for, where necessary, the appointment of an Integrated Consultancy Team, concept design (RIBA Design Stage 2), public consultation, securing planning permission, and the development of a business case.

10. While it is proposed that projects would be located within settlements with populations between 1,000 and 4,999, there will be no firm rule that precludes projects in settlements below the 1,000 threshold. This will provide maximum flexibility for councils to develop a balanced plan of investment in their areas and will not arbitrarily exclude viable projects which may be just under the threshold. However, all of the projects will need to demonstrate value for



money (VFM), and the VFM argument may be easier to make for larger settlements within these parameters.

### **Funding mechanism**

11. It is proposed that funding would be channelled to councils under Section 29 of the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This approach was taken with the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme and previously by the Department in its response to the Bank Buildings Fire. It would provide flexibility for councils to begin project delivery quickly to meet the immediate needs of smaller settlements as they recover from the impact of the pandemic. It would also provide security and certainty to councils to allow them to develop investment plans aimed at supporting small settlements in a very different environment.
  
12. The intended process would be to engage with councils to set out the programme aims, assist them with establishing stakeholder fora, and develop investment plans for their areas. Draft plans would be assessed by a strategic oversight group, drawn from senior DfC, DAERA and DfI officials, with a view to issuing letters of offer to Councils to enable them, for projects that are well developed, to begin project delivery and incur spend immediately.

### **Programme funding**

13. It is intended that the programme would commence in 2021/22 and run over 2 years. The quantum of this allocation will depend on funding that can be secured by Departments, but is indicatively estimated at £19.5m (DAERA £6.5m, DfC £6.5m, DfI £6.5m). Resource funding may also be available, but this has yet to be confirmed. It is anticipated that letters of offer could issue to councils in November/December.



14. Depending on the success of this programme, a possible follow up phase could be considered, building on experience gained and identified needs.
15. Councils will be expected to provide an element of funding support towards the programme. This can be capital or resource with a specified minimum of 10% of their investment plan cost.
16. The process for approving business cases for projects should be commensurate and proportionate with the scale of funding required. It is envisaged that any project costing in excess of £500,000 would require Departmental approval in line with existing approaches. Approval for smaller projects would be delegated to Councils to undertake, in line with established financial management processes and subject to test drilling by Departments.
17. As detailed above, the business case for funding the programme will be collaborative, setting out the aim to further policy objectives from all three policy departments.

### **Programme timeframes**

18. As above, the programme is aimed at delivering projects that are already well developed and should result in positive, visible impacts in the short term. These projects should contribute to assisting small settlements recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and complement funding support already provided by the three Departments. It is envisaged that subject to Ministerial agreement, approval of a business case, and securing of funding, that the programme would be delivered over a 2 year period.

### **Delivery model**

19. The delivery model for a COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme would replicate the approach taken for the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme, which has worked effectively and involves similar



stakeholder organisations and bodies. Indicative funding envelopes would be allocated to councils, and prioritised projects developed to reflect local need/demand.

20. Each Council would develop a “COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Plan” in consultation with key stakeholders from across the council area. A local stakeholder engagement forum should be established (if no suitable group is already in place) to inform this process and prioritise actions in line with agreed programme objectives.
21. DfC, DAERA, and DfI officials will support this process by engaging with stakeholder fora as they develop their Plans. This early engagement will help to determine whether a robust economic and policy case can be made, bringing into play the experience of officials. Each Council will submit a Plan for review by Directors from DfC, DAERA and DfI, to ensure deliverability and strategic fit with the programme, Departmental, and PfG outcomes, as well as other cross departmental initiatives such as the High Streets Taskforce.
22. In line with other funding programmes managed by departments, procurement and project delivery assurance will be sought from CPD, as has been provided in support of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. Preliminary engagement has already taken place and agreement reached for CPD to offer similar support and input as with the COVID Recovery Revitalisation Programme.

### **Indicative funding allocations per Council**

23. Given the different policy focus of each department, a different approach to determine indicative funding allocations will be required. It is proposed that DfC and DfI allocations are based on populations between 1,000 and 4,999 within each council area. DAERA’s proposed approach is to base allocations on rural populations within each council area. An indicative breakdown of allocations to each council is shown in the table below.



Council area	DfC allocation (£)	DAERA allocation (£)	DfI allocation (£)	Total (£)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	140,139	333,953	140,139	614,411
Ards and North Down	661,673	349,039	661,673	1,672,385
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	1,013,089	962,965	1,013,088	2,989,142
Belfast	-	-	-	-
Causeway Coast and Glens	605,920	698,848	605,919	1,910,687
Derry City and Strabane	668,807	412,814	668,807	1,750,428
Fermanagh and Omagh	450,331	778,664	450,330	1,679,325
Lisburn and Castlereagh	669,464	460,002	669,465	1,798,931
Mid and East Antrim	651,187	510,534	651,187	1,812,908
Mid Ulster	663,120	973,983	663,120	2,300,223
Newry, Mourne and Down	976,270	1,019,198	976,272	2,971,740
	6,500,000	6,500,000	6,500,000	19,500,000

24. Given that Belfast City Council has a very small rural population (1,162), it would only attract an indicative allocation of around £11,000. It is therefore proposed to exclude the Council area from this programme as funding of this scale would not permit any substantive project to be funded.

25. DfI funding can only be allocated to projects where there is a clear connection to blue/green infrastructure, climate change outputs/outcomes. DfC and DAERA funding should be focussed on projects located within settlements with populations between 1,000 and 4,999. There will be no firm rule that precludes projects in settlements below the 1,000 threshold, however, as with all supported projects, alignment with programme outcomes and value for money must be demonstrated in investment plans and business cases.

### **Project Selection**

26. Within the financial allocations as shown above, Councils would be responsible for identifying projects and establishing priority within their geographical areas. This process should be informed by the stakeholder engagement fora and



should show clear connections to the outcomes and objectives of the overall programme.

27. To guide project identification and development, DfC's urban regeneration project interventions include revitalisation, public realm, urban development grants, and comprehensive development schemes. Councils may wish to consider inclusion of similar types of projects and developing new innovative approaches to regeneration of their target settlement(s). However, the key regeneration objectives should still be the primary focus of interventions – creating vital and viable towns and villages that meet the needs of local citizens and the surrounding areas. Key outputs could include resident and visitor satisfaction with the appearance and environment of the townscape, civic pride, footfall, vacancy rates. The provision of large grant schemes, similar to those delivered under the Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme, to individuals or businesses is not envisaged within this programme.

28. Some proposed objectives to cover DfI's policy interests, supporting active travel, promoting connectivity and access to services, and/or create and enhance green / blue spaces, for example could be drawn from the following exemplar project ideas:

- cycle tracks or lanes - including pop-up cycle lanes and creating space on pathways for cyclists;
- pavement or footway widening to allow for physical distancing;
- cycle parking and charging facilities;
- connection pathways to access town centres the centre of settlements and key services – adapting existing routes and/or creating desirable new ingress and egress routes
- tree planting incidental to creating/improving walking or cycling paths; and
- parklets, rain gardens, living roofs and living vertical gardens.





29. DAERA objectives for the programme could be drawn from the following high level policy areas:

Village investments emanating from the integrated village plans such as:

- derelict and vacant site enhancement;
- environmental improvements;
- conservation and upgrading of rural culture and heritage (natural and built); and
- gateway projects.

### **Proposed SMART objectives for the programme**

30. The following SMART objectives are proposed for the programme:

- By December 2021, each district council will have established, or identified, a suitable stakeholder engagement forum to support the development and delivery of its Regeneration Plan.
- To agree a costed COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Plan for each district council by March 2022.
- To support each district council to deliver its Regeneration Plan by March 2023.
- By March 2023, 70% of residents surveyed, in smaller settlements where projects have been delivered, agree that funded works would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.
- By March 2023, 70% of people surveyed while using rural settlements where projects have been delivered for work, tourism or leisure, agree that the improvements to the area would encourage people to live, work, visit and invest in the area.
- By March 2023, attitudinal surveys completed by traders indicate that 70% believe that schemes funded through this Programme will have positively impacted on sales figures.
- By March 2023, attitudinal surveys indicate 40% of the public agree that projects supported would encourage people to change from car use to more environmentally friendly choices such as walking and cycling for journeys of under two miles.



- By March 2023, each Regeneration Plan will support projects which increase the use of land for active travel (i.e. extended footways, cycle ways, connecting pathways) which connects people with key services and ensures accessibility for all including those with disabilities.

## APPENDIX 2

### REQUEST FROM DUNGANNON ENTERPRISE CENTRE

**From:** Brian MacAuley <[brian@dungannonenterprise.com](mailto:brian@dungannonenterprise.com)>  
**Sent:** 07 October 2021 10:57  
**To:** Adrian McCreesh <[Adrian.McCreesh@midulstercouncil.org](mailto:Adrian.McCreesh@midulstercouncil.org)>  
**Cc:** Councillor W Cuddy <[Walter.Cuddy@midulstercouncil.org](mailto:Walter.Cuddy@midulstercouncil.org)>; Councillor D Molloy <[Dominic.Molloy@midulstercouncil.org](mailto:Dominic.Molloy@midulstercouncil.org)>; [yvonne@outoftheboxconsulting.co.uk](mailto:yvonne@outoftheboxconsulting.co.uk)  
**Subject:** Council Site on Feeney's Lane

FAO Adrian McCreesh

At the Dungannon Enterprise Centre Board meeting yesterday, it was agreed that I would write to the Council requesting that the Council lease its site on Feeneys Lane to the Centre for a 10 year period.

Dungannon Enterprise Centre's charitable mission is to support the economic development of the area through the fostering of profitable enterprises. The Board is very concerned that the town centre is facing very difficult economic times ahead and needs support from wherever it can get. The town centre retailing sector is suffering and it is our view that increased footfall and visitors to the town is a key part of the solution.

To that end, the Enterprise Centre would like to lease the land on Feeneys Lane, owned by the Council for a 10-year period, and develop the site as a semi-permanent outdoor space to hold initiatives and events that would attract local residents, visitors and shoppers back into the town. It would be intended to create a working group of the Enterprise Centre Board and co-opted traders to plan and manage the initiative and to source funding for the project.

As you are aware, the space is located adjacent to the Market Square and the entrance to the Hill of the O'Neil, and we believe the a comprehensive programme of events held on the Feeneys Lane site will enrich and compliment the Council managed events run throughout the year.

Considering that the town centre's is now recovering from two lockdowns, we would ask that the matter be brought to the Council for consideration as a matter of urgency.

Regards

**Brian MacAuley** (CEO)

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