

EU DRAFT COMPETITIVENESS AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES (2007-2013) RURAL PROOFING ASSESSMENT

Introduction

1. The Department of Finance and Personnel, European Division has prepared this Rural Proofing Assessment for the 2007-13 EU Competitiveness and Employment (C&E) Programmes based on the guidance on rural proofing provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In drawing up the proposed C&E Programmes' spending priorities, all Departments proposing expenditure areas were asked to identify any impacts on rural areas. This DFP assessment is based on those inputs and the overall conclusion reached is that all the proposed (C&E) Programmes' expenditure areas would either be available to both rural and urban communities or for some activities would have a demonstrably positive rural effect.

Context

2. During the 2000-2006 EU funding period, elements of three EU Structural Funds Programmes – the Programme for Building Sustainable Development, the NI LEADER+ Programme and the PEACE II Programme – provided specific support to rural communities through the EAGGF and EFF Structural Funds. For the 2007-13 EU funding period these Structural Funds have been replaced by two new EU Funds established from 1 January 2007 – the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has prepared a new Rural Development Programme (funded in part from EAFRD), and Northern Ireland's part of a new UK EFF Operational Programme, for European Commission approval; it is these 2007-13 EU Programmes and not the 2007-13 EU Competitiveness Structural Funds Programmes that will provide rural areas with the specially targeted successor EU support to that they received from Structural Fund Programmes in the 2000-06 period. It remains important however, that all areas of Northern Ireland, both rural and urban, are eligible for C&E Structural Funds support and this is the case. Complementarity and coherence between actions financed by ERDF, ESF, EAFRD and EFF will be ensured.

Assessment

3. For most of the specific expenditure areas proposed for the C&E Programmes, the Departments making the proposals have indicated that the expenditure will be available to both urban and rural areas. For other expenditure as highlighted below, proposing Departments have identified a positive rural effect.

4. For the ERDF Competitiveness Programme such positive effects are expected from the indicative activities under the proposed priority in the ERDF Programme for 'Improving Accessibility and Protecting and Enhancing the Environment' that includes measures to upgrade Northern Ireland's existing broadband infrastructure making high-speed telecommunications more widely accessible and to support sustainable energy diversification programmes. The proposed 'Enterprise and Entrepreneurship' priority includes provision for possible Rural Enterprise activities and a key element of the enterprise strategy is the provision for each local council to develop its own action plan to address local community needs.

5. With regard to the spending priorities for the ESF Employment Programme, the proposed expenditure areas, to help people into sustainable employment and improve workforce skills and adaptability, would address the needs of both urban and rural communities, in that the ESF Programme would primarily be taken forward as part of the Department of Employment and Learning's regional employment and skills policies, which apply throughout Northern Ireland.

6. The Structural Funds Implementing Regulation (EC) No 1828/2006 requires a comprehensive Communication Plan to be drawn up and implemented for each Operational Programme – the implementation of the Plan is closely monitored by the Programme Monitoring Committee, which will include representatives for rural interests.

Conclusion

7. DFP has considered the issues set out in the rural proofing checklist, and has completed this assessment of their impact on rural areas based on information provided by Departments proposing the expenditure areas for the 2007-13 Competitiveness and Employment Programmes. Programmes have been developed to recognise the needs of both rural and urban communities. The Competitiveness and Employment Programmes will apply throughout Northern Ireland and some of the Competitiveness Programme spending priorities would have a positive rural effect. Provision to address the rural needs, currently included in the 2000-06 EU Programmes, has been made in the separate Rural Development Programme. On this basis it is considered that there are no barriers to participation for rural communities within the Competitiveness and Employment Programmes.

8. However, rural communities interests are invited to respond to the draft Competitiveness & Employment Programmes Consultation Document on:

‘What are your views about additional rural issues that need to be addressed under the draft Competitiveness and/or Employment Programme?’

It would be helpful if all responses could be completed on-line on the specified form provided at Annex C of the Consultation Document – by incorporating your views on the above at Question 3 and/or 4 please. Alternatively ways to respond to the Consultation are detailed in the section ‘How to respond to this consultation’.

DFP, EUD

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