

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

Less Favoured Areas (LFAs) account for a large proportion of our agricultural area in the North and are home to the majority of our suckler cows and breeding sheep, as well as many of our most valuable habitats and visually appealing landscapes. They represent a valuable asset for the region and it is, therefore, vital that any government support meets the needs of LFAs, is properly targeted and is seen to represent value for money.

In developing and delivering this review of support arrangements for the LFAs, my Department has gathered and analysed a very broad range of evidence and information to inform the need for, and the contribution of, any future LFA support. In this process we have considered the upcoming changes in the EU legislation which governs the nature of LFA support. We have also sought the input of our stakeholders to this process, which has been both significant and extremely valuable. I very much welcome this engagement and look forward to their continued active involvement as part of the policy development process.

This review document sets out the background to the provision of LFA support and contains a comprehensive and detailed body of evidence. From this evidence base, the future role of support has been assessed and four alternative approaches to future LFA support have been proposed. We now need to take the views of as broad a range of stakeholders as possible on the analysis that has been conducted and the options presented. I would

encourage anyone wishing to get a summary of all the evidence and options presented to read Chapter 12 of this document.

Alongside undertaking this review, the Department is also contributing to a review of the designation of LFAs being led by the EU Commission. Whilst this is a separate process from the review of LFA support presented in this document, the two issues are linked. Therefore, in taking a final decision on future LFA support, I will give due consideration to the emerging conclusions of the EU re-designation process and its possible implications.

This is a very important consultation for the rural community in the North and I would encourage all individuals and organisations that have an interest in this issue to consider carefully both the evidence and the options presented and to give us your views.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Gildernew', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michelle Gildernew MP MLA
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development